Al-Mīzān

An Exegesis of the Qur'an

al-ʿAllāma al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī

Translated by: Salim Rossier

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In the Name of Allah,
the Beneficent, the Merciful.

All praise is due to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds;
the Beneficent, the Merciful;
the Master of the Day of Judgment;
Thee only we serve, and to Thee alone we beseech
for help;
Guide us in the straight path;
The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed
favors,not of those against whom Thou art
wrathful, nor of those who are astray.

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O' Allah! send Your blessings to the head of
Your messengers and the last of
Your prophets,
Muḥammad and his pure and cleansed progeny.
Also send Your blessings to all Your
prophets and envoys.

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Arabic Transliteration Key

Arabic Letters	Transliteration	Arabic Letters	Transliteration
ا	ā	ع	ʿ
ب	b	غ	gh
ت	t	ف	f
ث	th	ق	q
ج	j	ك	k
ح	ḥ	ل	l
خ	kh	م	m
د	d	ن	n
ذ	dh	ه	h
ر	r	و	w/ū
ز	z	ى	y/ī
س	s	ء	ʾ
ش	sh	ة	-
ص	ṣ	ـَ	a
ض	ḍ	ـِ	i
ط	ṭ	ـُ	u
ظ	ẓ		

Publisher's Note

In an effort to make the text more accessible to English-speaking readers, the editors have chosen to use English names for the prophets and figures (as listed below but not limited to) and to use Anglicized terms that now appear in English dictionaries.

Ādam	Adam	Moses	Moses
Dāwūd	David	Sulaymān	Solomon
Hārūn	Aaron	Shuʿayb	Jethro
Ibrāhīm	Abraham	Yaʿqūb	Jacob
ʿĪsā	Jesus	ʾAyyūb	Job
Isḥāq	Isaac	Yūshaʿ	Joshua
Ismāʿīl	Ishmael	Yūsuf	Joseph
Jibrāʾīl	Gabriel	Zakariyyā	Zachariah
Mary	Mary		

Arabic terms and names have been transliterated according to the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*).

For ease of reading, glyphs and traditional honorifics such as "peace be upon him" or (s.a.w.) which are commonly used as a gesture of respect after the name of the Prophet Muhammad, the Imams, or other sacred figures have been omitted from this text. No disrespect is intended, and may God's peace and blessings be upon them all!

Foreword

English volume 26 corresponds to the second half of Arabic volume 13 and comprises of the *tafsīr* of the entire Chapter 18 (The Cave) of the Holy Qur'an.

This is the second edition of the previous edition which was published by Tawheed Institute Australia Ltd. in April 2014. Minor corrections have been made in this edition including reformatting to conform to our latest publications.

The purpose of revealing Chapter 18 (The Cave) was to narrate three amazing stories which are not mentioned anywhere else in the Qur'an apart from this chapter: the stories of the Companions of the Cave, Moses and his servant on their way to where the seas meet, and Dhu al-Qarnayn. They are narrated so inferences can be drawn from them and applied to what is mentioned in the chapter; namely, to refute the belief that God has any partner, and to inspire mindfulness of Him.[1]

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1 This is an excerpt from the author's introduction of the chapter. (Pub.)

About the Author

The late Islamic scholar, thinker, and philosopher, ʿAllāmah al-SayyidMuḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī came from the celebrated Ṭabāṭabāʾī family of Tabriz. For the last three centuries, this family has produced generation after generation of renowned religious scholars in Azerbaijan (Iran). They are descendants of the second Imam, al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī (peace be on both of them). The clan is also referred to with the title, al-Qāḍī.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was the son of al-Sayyid Muḥammad b. al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī. ʿAllāmah was born in Tabriz on 29 Dhū al-Ḥijjah 1321/17 March 1904. His father died in 1330 (1912). The orphaned child grew up in Tabriz, and after completing his religious education there, around 1341 (1923), he went to Najaf (Iraq), the most important center of Shia religious learning.

In Najaf, he began his higher studies with such illustrious scholars as Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Nāʾīnī al-Gharawī (1277–1355/1860 or 1861–1936), the son of Shaykh al-Islām ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, and Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Gharawī al-Iṣfahānī (1296–1361/1878–1942), the son of al-Ḥājj Muḥammad Ḥasan, Muʿīn al-Tujjār.

These two were among the most prominent scholars in the Shia world. They were among the most prominent scholars not only in the fields of Shia jurisprudence and principles of jurisprudence, but in all Islamic subjects. Their opinions and theories are still followed today. Each founded his own school of thought and trained thousands of Shia scholars and jurists; and all the *marājiʿ al-taqlīd*[1] of the Shia world, to this day, are their students. Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Gharawī al-Iṣfahānī was a philosopher, unsurpassed in his time; a man of literature; and a poet in Arabic and Persian; he was a genius whose achievements made others look up to him as their ideal. Shaykh Nāʾīnī, with his bold opinions and decrees in the political and social life of the Muslim *umma*, has carved for himself a niche in history.

1 The highest authorities of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) whose rulings are followed by others.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was much influenced by these two teachers, particularly by al-Iṣfahānī, in the development of his thought and knowledge. A third influence was that of al-Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim Jaʿfar Khwānsārī (1313– 80/1895 or 1896–1961), the son of al-Sayyid Muḥammad al-Mūsāwī, known as "the mathematician." ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was proud to have studied mathematics with him, and also wrote a book on higher mathematics, in which he applied some special theories of his teacher.

ʿAllāmah studied philosophy and metaphysics from al-Sayyid Ḥusayn al-Ḥusaynī Bādkūbahʾī; the latter was a student of al-Sayyid Riḍā, who studied with al-Sayyid Mūsā, a well-known teacher of philosophy and related subjects. In the fields of ethics and spirituality, ʿAllāmah received his training from his relatives, al-Sayyid ʿAlī al-Qāḍī (1285–1366/1869–1947), a well-known scholar who established a school of spiritual and ethical training which still flourishes today.

All these influences combined to create in ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī a well-balanced academic and spiritual personality. He was a well-respected authority on religious subjects of jurisprudence and its fundamentals; a philosopher of independent views and new theories; and an inspired model of ethical and spiritual perfection. He not only taught morality, but also lived it. Yet it is also correct to state that his scholarship was overshadowed by his fame and prestige as a philosopher and a spiritual man.

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī returned to Tabriz in 1353/1934, where he was welcomed as a religious scholar. There he spent his time teaching higher philosophy to willing disciples—but it was a small place for his talents. In 1364/1945 he migrated to Qum, the most important center of religious education in Iran. In Qum, he remained engaged in imparting the knowledge of ethics, philosophy, and the exegesis of the Qurʾan to those students who had already attained a high level of erudition. There he remained until his death on Sunday, 18 Muḥarram 1402/15 November 1981. May God bestow His mercy on him. Amen.

Many religious leaders of the present generation were and are among his students and disciples, the most famous being the late Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (1338–99/1920–79).

ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī's fame rests on his academic works—the most important being his great exegesis of the Qurʾan, *al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*. It is said to be the foundation stone of the academic prestige

which ʿAllāmah al-Ṭabāṭabāʾī was accorded in the Muslim world.

Among his other works is *Uṣūl-i falsafah va ravish-i riʾalism* [Practical and Philosophical Principles of Realism]. This book is a comparative study of Islamic philosophy and various modern anti-Islamic schools of thoughts, especially Marxism. His disciple, the late Murtaḍā Muṭahharī, annotated this work, thus making it easily accessible to the average man.

A third book, *Shiʿa dār Islām*, was first published in Persian; later it was published in English with the title, *Shiʾite Islam.* The ʿAllāmah wrote this book on the request of Professor Kenneth Morgan of Colgate University, to introduce Shiism to the West.

However, it is his *tafsīr, al-Mīzān* (published in 20 volumes in Arabic) which presents the true picture of the author's academic style and his way of thinking. In the preface to volume 1, the author outlines his plan, to explain the Qurʾan with the help of the Qurʾan itself. This he faithfully does, all the way through to the end of the *tafsīr*.

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Chapter 18

al-Kahf (The Cave)

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Verses 1-8

بِسْمِ ٱللَّهِ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنِ ٱلرَّحِيمِ

In the name of God, the most Merciful, the most Compassionate

Introduction

This chapter invites people to true belief and good deeds through warning and giving glad tidings as indicated by the first two verses and the final: . . . *Therefore, whoever hopes to meet his Lord should do good deeds and not join anyone in the service of his Lord* (18:110). Special attention is given to refuting that God has a son by issuing a specific warning: *And (so that he may) warn those who say: God has taken a son* (18:4), after first issuing a general warning: . . . *So that he may warn of a severe punishment from Him* . . . (18:2)

This is addressed to the idolaters who believe that the angels, jinn, and spiritual reformers (*muṣliḥīn*) are sons of God, [and it is addressed to] the Christians who say "the Messiah is the son of God." Perhaps it is also addressed to the Jews who attribute partners to Him, as the Qur'an mentions: *And the Jews say: ʿUzayr* (Ezra) *is God's son*. . . (9:30).

It would not be far from the truth to say that the purpose of revealing this chapter was to narrate three amazing stories which are not mentioned anywhere else in the Qur'an apart from this chapter: the stories of the Companions of the Cave (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*), Moses and his servant on their way to where the seas meet, and Dhū l-Qarnayn. They are narrated so inferences can be drawn from them and applied to what is mentioned in the chapter; namely, to refute the belief that God has any partner, and to inspire mindfulness of Him.

The context of the verses shows that the chapter was revealed in Mecca, except for the verse beginning with: *And keep yourself patient [by being]*

with those who call upon their Lord (18:28); this will be explained later.

Commentary

ٱلۡحَمۡدُ لِلَّهِ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَنزَلَ عَلَىٰ عَبۡدِهِ ٱلۡكِتَٰبَ وَلَمۡ يَجۡعَل لَّهُۥ عِوَجَاۜ ١

(18:1) ***(All) praise is due to God who revealed the Book to His servant and did not make in it any crookedness.***

ʿ*Iwaj* can be spelled with either a *fatha* above or a *kasra* below the *ayn*, and it means "crookedness." *Majmaʿ al-bayān* says:

> ʿ*Awaj* is used for something visible, such as a spear or a wooden column. ʿ*Iwaj* means something which does not have a visible outer form, such as religion or, speech.

Perhaps it also means what can or cannot be seen, and whatever forms are easily visible, as al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī says in his book, *Mufradāt al-Qurʾān*:

> ʿ*Awaj* is used for what can easily be seen with the eye, like propped up wood; whereas ʿ*iwaj* is used for what is perceived by thought or reflection (*baṣīra*), such as a flat land, the unevenness of which can be realized through reflection; and like religion and sustenance.

These definitions are not contradicted (by how the words are used) in His saying: *You shall not see therein any crookedness* (ʿiwajan) *or unevenness*. (20:107)

So bear that in mind.

The Almighty begins the chapter by praising Himself for what He revealed to His servant; namely, the Qur'an, which contains no deviation from the truth. It looks after His servants' best interests both in this life and in the hereafter. All praise is due to Him for all the goodness and blessings that came with it from the day it [this book] was revealed to the Day of Resurrection.

So, the critical researcher should not doubt that all the goodness and rightness in human society comes from the blessings of what the noble prophets called people to: the word of the Truth, good manners, and good deeds. The Qur'an and the message have both had a beautiful hand in the refinement and advancement of human society, encouraging progress in useful knowledge and good deeds; both the Qur'an and the message have had their own impact, all distinguishing the fourteen centuries of

the age of the Qur'an from the centuries that precede them; so, for this, all praise is due to God.

Thus, it becomes clear that it is wrong for some exegetes to say that this verse means, "Say, Praise is due to God who revealed . . ." (That is, to take this verse as a command to say "Praise be to God" instead of an actual praise of God).

The pronoun "*it*" in the clause, *And did not make in it any crookedness*, refers to the Qur'an. The phrase is a circumstantial expression (*ḥāl*) describing the Book.

Rightly directing (*Qayyiman,* in the next verse), is another description after the first one. This is what the context indicates because He is praising Himself for revealing a Book described as having no crookedness at all, one that is "rightly directing" for the best interests of human society. It can be inferred that equal attention is paid to both the adjectival phrases because they describe the Book's condition or status.

It is said that the phrase, *and did not make in it any crookedness,* is adjoined by a conjunction to the relative clause, and that "rightly directing" describes the condition or status (*ḥāl*) which is derived from the pronoun "it" in "to it" (*lahu*). This explanation means that He did not make any crookedness in the Book since it is rightly directing. Alternatively, it is said that "rightly directing" is placed in the accusative case by implied words, "He did not make in it any crookedness, making it rightly directing (guiding)". Both explanations would mean that attention would be divided between the revelation itself and the Book being straightforward without any crookedness. You now know that they both contradict what can be inferred from the context.

It is also said that some phrases in the verses have been placed in front of others in contrast to where they would usually be placed, and that what is meant is: "He revealed the Book properly and did not make any crookedness in it"—but this is the worst explanation.

First, any crookedness in the Book is denied; and, next, its being "rightly directing" is affirmed, because the former (the absence of crookedness) is perfection itself, whereas the latter (being rightly directing) is something that would bring about perfection. Thus, perfection is naturally mentioned before the thing that would bring about perfection.

ʿIwajan (crookedness), which occurs after the negative particle "did not," is indefinite to indicate generality. The Qur'an is therefore straight

in all respects, clear in its wording, eloquent in its meaning, on target in its guidance, alive in its proofs and demonstrations, admonishing when it commands and prohibits, truthful in the stories it narrates and in its glad tidings, definitive in the judgment it passes, protected from corruption (or interpolation), without any discrepancy in it; and falsehood does not approach it from the front or from behind.

قَيِّمًا لِّيُنذِرَ بَأْسًا شَدِيدًا مِّن لَّدُنْهُ وَيُبَشِّرَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ أَجْرًا حَسَنًا ۝٢ مَّٰكِثِينَ فِيهِ أَبَدًا ۝٣

(18:2-3) ***Rightly directing, so that he may warn of a severe punishment from Him and give glad tidings to the believers who do good deeds that they shall have a goodly reward, Staying in it forever.***

Al-qayyim describes someone who takes care of another person's interests and manages his affairs, such as a household's breadwinner who looks after the household's interests and whom the members of the household refer to with regard to their affairs. The Book is straightforward (*qayyim*) only on account of its content. What the Qur'an contains is true belief and good practice (*al-ʿamal al-ṣāliḥ*) as He said: . . . *guiding to the truth and to a straight path* (46:30).

This is indeed the religion, and He describes it as *qayyim* in various places in His Book, for example: *Then turn your face straight to the right religion*. . .(30:43).

Thus, the Book is described as being right (*qayyim*) because Islam is the right religion, one that is in the best interests of humankind in this world and in the hereafter.

It may be the other way around: the Book was first described as being straight and then the religion was later described likewise, as in the verse: . . . *and that is the right religion* (dīn al-qayyima) (98:5).

This is based on interpreting the clause, *the right religion*, as the religion of the true books (*dīn al-kutub al-qayyima*), which is a kind of a metaphor.

It is said that *al-qayyim* is what is straight and even (as opposed to odd), or that in which there is neither neglect nor exaggeration.

It is also said that *al-qayyim* means that which is responsible for all other heavenly books, confirming and preserving them, or repealing their

codes of religious law. It concludes what He said with the statement, *so that it may warn of a severe punishment from Him and give glad tidings to the believers*, which supports what we said above.

The verse (18:2) warns the unbelievers of a severe punishment from God. The likely meaning is an implied one—to warn those who do not do righteous deeds, both those who do not believe at all and those who do believe but commit sinful deeds. This is within the context of qualifying the believers who have been given glad tidings as those—*who do good*.

In any case, the sentence explains why He revealed the Book to His servant perfectly. Had it not been straight in itself and able to correct other things, to warn, and to deliver glad tidings, it would not have integrity, as is obvious.

It is clear that the implication of "a goodly reward" is heaven, a meaning which is deduced from the context of the next verse, *staying in it forever*. And the meaning is clear.

وَيُنذِرَ ٱلَّذِينَ قَالُواْ ٱتَّخَذَ ٱللَّهُ وَلَدًا ﴿٤﴾

(18:4) *And warn those who say: God has taken a son.*

The statement refers to all idolaters who say that the angels—and perhaps even the jinn and the human reformers—are His sons or daughters, [and to warn] the Christians who say that "Christ is the son of God." The Qur'an also says that the Jews claim that: *ʿUzayr* (Ezra) *is God's son.*

This second, specific warning (to the Jews and Christians) was given after the first general warning, *So that he may warn of a severe punishment from Him*, to draw greater attention to their belief.

مَّا لَهُم بِهِۦ مِنْ عِلْمٍ وَلَا لِءَابَآئِهِمْ ۚ كَبُرَتْ كَلِمَةً تَخْرُجُ مِنْ أَفْوَٰهِهِمْ ۚ إِن يَقُولُونَ إِلَّا كَذِبًا ﴿٥﴾

(18:5) *They have no knowledge of it, nor did their fathers; a grievous word it is that comes out of their mouths; they speak nothing but a lie.*

What they all meant was literally *begetting* as is made clear by His words: *How could He have a son when He has no consort, while He (Himself) created everything, and He is the One who knows all things?* (6:101).

God refuted what they claim, first by saying that what they uttered was out of ignorance, not based on knowledge, and second by the clause at the end of the verse, *they speak nothing but a lie.*

The clause, *they have no knowledge* (ʿilm) *of it,* applies to all of them—fathers and sons. They blamed their fathers for their belief in it, claiming that it was the religion of their forefathers who were more knowledgeable than them, since they said, "we should do nothing but follow them and walk in their footsteps." Thus God draws a distinction between them and their forefathers by first denying their knowledge and then that of their forefathers, whom they were claiming to take their knowledge from.

The sentence, *A grievous word it is that comes out of their mouths. . .* rebukes them because of the seriousness of what they claimed—that is, "*God has taken a son*"—and because of the enormous audacity against God when they claimed that He has a partner, thus rendering Him corporeal, made up of parts, in need of a helper or a vicegerent—far be He above that!

It is possible that they began saying this because some of their ancestors may have referred to some people honorifically (as the "son of God")—like the Jews said: *ʿUzayr is God's son*, and: *We are God's children and His beloved* (5:18)*;* to indicate their closeness to God. Also, their earliest ancestors may have allegorically referred to the first creation as a *son* (of God) because it came from Him the way a child comes from its father. Or they may have been referring to (God as) the means by which one comes into being—the way a man's wife is the means by which his son comes into being. Thus, they called some of the first angels that were created "wives," and others "sons" and "daughters" (of the Almighty).

Even though the latter two types of expressions and other similar expressions are not as bad as the first one, because they are allegorical with the intent to be honorific, they are still considered unlawful according to the shariah. The fact that such expressions steer people to everlasting misery and eternal doom is enough for them to be unlawful.

فَلَعَلَّكَ بَٰخِعٌ نَّفۡسَكَ عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَٰرِهِمۡ إِن لَّمۡ يُؤۡمِنُواْ بِهَٰذَا ٱلۡحَدِيثِ أَسَفًا ٦

(18:6) ***Then maybe you will kill*** **(bākhiʿun)** ***yourself with grief over them if they do not believe in this announcement.***

Bukhūʿ and *bakhʿ* means "killing" and "consuming." *Āthār* are tracks left by a person walking across the land and *asaf* means "severe grief." *This*

announcement, refers to the Qur'an.

This and the two subsequent verses are meant to console the Prophet and encourage him. The *fā*ʾ refers back to what they said as a result of their disbelief and rejection of God's revelations as understood from the previous verses.[1] This verse means: "It is feared that you will be consumed with profound grief following the turning of their backs on the Qur'an and away from you." *ʿAlā āthārihim* (lit. "over their tracks") metaphorically means their turning their backs on and away from him.

إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا مَا عَلَى ٱلْأَرْضِ زِينَةً لَّهَا لِنَبْلُوَهُمْ أَيُّهُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ۝٧ وَإِنَّا لَجَٰعِلُونَ مَا عَلَيْهَا صَعِيدًا جُرُزًا ۝٨

(18:7–8) ***Surely We have made whatever is on the earth an embellishment for it* (zīnatan lahā)** ***so that We may try them (as to) which of them is best in deeds. And most surely We will make what is on it bare ground without herbage.***

Zīna means "a beautiful thing," "an ornament," "a decoration," or "an embellishment" which is added to something in order to make it beautiful and desirable. *Ṣaʿīd* means "the face of the earth." According to *Majmaʿ al-bayān*, *juruz* means, "barren earth which seems to devour all growth."

In these two verses, there is a remarkable explanation of the truth about man's earthly existence, namely about those human souls whose essences are sublime and noble and would not have inclined toward the earth and the life on it. However, God decreed that their perfection and eternal happiness would be in true belief and good deeds, so the divine providence brilliantly resorted to placing them where they have to believe and act, and sending them to a testing place for purification and cleansing, making them dwell on the earth until an appointed time and creating attachments and ties between them and life's pleasures on earth; [ties] such as money, children, and prestige, things [which have been] made dear to their hearts. That which is beautiful to them and dear to their hearts on the earth is the earth's ornamentation and the adornment which it is decorated with; their souls cling to the earth because of it, feeling comfortable with it.

When their term for dwelling on the earth as appointed by God comes

1 *Fā*ʾ is an Arabic conjunction usually translated as "so." It occurs at the beginning of the verse. (Ed.)

to an end, with whatever trial and tribulation He willed having been realized, God takes away whatever attachment there existed between them and what was on the earth. He effaces whatever beauty and finery it had, and the earth becomes like barren dust on which there is no vegetation or bloom. They are then called to journey all alone as they were originally created by God.

This is God's way—in creating human beings, making them dwell on earth, making what is on it seem good to test them with it so that the honorable people would be distinguished from the rest. The Almighty brings generation after generation, individual after individual, making the life's pleasures seem good to them, leaving it up to them to choose—all this [is] in order to test them. Then, once the test is over, He cuts them off from the ornaments of the adorned world and transfers them from the abode of toil to the abode of punishment and reward. God said: . . . *And if you had seen when the unjust shall be in the agonies of death, and the angels shall spread forth their hands: Give up your souls!* . . . (6:93) *And certainly you have come to Us alone as We created you at first, and you have left behind the things which We gave you, and We do not see with you your intercessors about whom you asserted were (God's) associates in respect to you; certainly the ties between you are now cut off and what you asserted has deserted you* (6:94).

In sum, the verse means (while addressing the Prophet): "Do not be distressed or feel sad for them because they turned their backs on your call, which includes warning as well as conveying glad tidings, and they have kept themselves busy enjoying life's pleasures, for they are neither the first to do so nor are they the last. The reality of this life of theirs is a type of divine preparation; that is, We made them dwell on the earth, then made what is on the earth a finery; a person who gazes on it is tested, in a way that their souls would become attached to it so that We may try them (as to) which of them is best in deeds. We will then make this very thing, which was made to appear good to them, like barren dust on which there is neither vegetation nor anything which a soul would desire. It is not as if God willed them all to have faith and hence was defeated by their disbelief in the book and their protracted misguidance, and, hence, you would destroy yourself with grief over them. Instead, He willed that they be tried and tested, and His will and power shall always prevail."

From the above, it is clear that the clause, *Most surely We will make what is on it bare ground without herbage*, is a metaphorical allusion, meaning cutting the link and attachment between the human being and

the pleasures of the worldly life on the earth.

It may be said that what is implied is the actual *ground without herbage*, that is, "*We will render all the finery on earth to dust, level it with the earth, making it smooth ground without herbage or anything else.*"

The words (*on it* as opposed to "it") in the clause, *What is on it. . .* is an instance of spelling out something which is normally expressed through pronouns—as it would be natural to say: "*And most surely, We will make it . . .*" The reason for this is perhaps to draw attention to its description as being on the earth.

Examining Narrations

(1) Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (said regarding the verse), *so that he may warn them of a severe punishment*:
"The 'severe punishment' is (concerning) ʿAlī. It is from (*min ladun*) God's Messenger. With ʿAlī, he fought his enemy. Such is the meaning of His words, *so that he may warn them of a severe punishment from Him (min ladunhu)*."[1]

Author's comment: Ibn Shahr Āshūb also narrates this hadith from Imam al-Bāqir and Imam al-Sādiq. It is an allegorical interpretation (*taṭbīq*), not exegesis (*tafsīr*).

(2) Concerning the verse, *Then maybe you will kill yourself. . .* , Abū Jaʿfar [Imam al-Bāqir] said:
"It means killing yourself over them. As for *asafan*, it means with grief."[2]

(3) ʿAbdullāh b. ʿUmar is quoted saying:
"God's Messenger recited the verse, *So that We may try them (as to) which of them is best in deeds*. So I asked, What does that mean, O Messenger of God? He replied, [it means] 'So that We may try which of them is better restrained, better at refraining from what God has forbidden, and quicker at obeying God.'"[3]

(4) Regarding His words, *bare ground without herbage*, Abū Jaʿfar [Imam al-Bāqir] said that it is (ground) on which nothing grows.[4]

1 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī, related by* Al-Barqī (without a chain of narrators), from Abū Baṣīr.

2 *Tafsīr al-Qummī,* related by Abū Jarūd.

3 Ibn Jarīr, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, and Ibn Mardawayh narrate in *al-Durr al-manthūr* and al-Ḥākim in *al-Tārīkh*.

4 *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, related by Abū Jārūd.

Verses 9–26

Introduction

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These verses narrate the story of the Companions of the Cave. Narrations say that the Jews advised the Quraysh to ask the Prophet about three things in order to test the authenticity of his claim to prophethood: the story of the Companions of the Cave, the story of Moses and his servant, and the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn. The only difference is that this story is not narrated in a way which suggests that it was an answer to a question in the manner the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn is mentioned: *And they ask you about Dhū l-Qarnayn, although there is something at the end of it which does give such an impression* (18:83). *And do not say of anything: Surely I will do it tomorrow, unless God pleases* (18:23), the explanation of which will come later.

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The context of the first three verses gives the impression that the story of the cave was vaguely familiar before the revelation came down narrating its details. This is especially true of the context evidenced by His words: *Or do you think that the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription were wonders among Our signs?* (18:23).

What was revealed filled in the gaps in their knowledge of the story, beginning with His words: *We relate to you their story with truth* (18:13).

This story—along with the denial of it being a wonder among the signs of God—is appended to the preceding verses to show that everything on earth is a test. God made everything on earth an embellishment which human beings would become engrossed in and attracted to, oblivious of everything else. Then, after a short time, God will turn the earth into a barren land. This is a divine sign; equally, it was a divine sign when the Companions of the Cave were overwhelmed with sleep for 300 solar years in the mouth of a cave, and when He revived them, they thought that they had tarried for only a day or part of a day.

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This worldly abode, whose vanity and beauty everyone is engrossed in while being oblivious to everything else, is itself a divine sign; it parallels the sign represented by the Companions of the Cave. God will rouse people from their sleep (in their graves) and ask them: . . . *How many*

years did you tarry in (your graves in) the earth? They will say: We tarried a day or part of a day (23:112-113) . . .and . . . *On that Day, when they shall see what they are promised, they shall be as if they had not tarried (in their graves) save an hour of the day . . .* (46:35).

Thus, the divine sign presented by the story of the Companions of the Cave is not a new or a wondrous one. On the contrary, it is an ongoing phenomenon. It will come to pass as long as the days and nights come to pass over humankind.

In the three verses beginning from, *Then maybe you will kill yourself with grief over them* (18:6), God seems to be telling His Prophet: "It is as if you have not turned away from their preoccupation with this world and their disbelief. They disbelieve in these words because they are attached to the adornments of this world, and these adornments are a divine sign like the sign of the Companions of the Cave. They were in their cave, and then He revived them. This has sorely grieved you. Nay, you too reckoned that the story of the Companions of the Cave was a wondrous sign, something unique."

God did not reveal this explicitly, perhaps to safeguard the holy Prophet from being accused of heedlessness or obliviousness. Furthermore, allusion is more eloquent than explicitness.

This conclusion results from reflecting on the reason why the story was appended here. It also explains the contextual relevance of appending the stories which come after this one: the story of the two men, one of whom had two gardens; and the story of Moses and his servant (the explanation of which will follow). Other reasons have been mentioned as to why the story (of the Companions of the Cave) has been appended (to the preceding verses), but they are not worth mentioning.

Commentary

أَمْ حَسِبْتَ أَنَّ أَصْحَٰبَ ٱلْكَهْفِ وَٱلرَّقِيمِ كَانُوا۟ مِنْ ءَايَٰتِنَا عَجَبًا ﴿٩﴾

(18:9) *Or do you think* (ḥasibta) *that the Companions of the Cave* (kahf) *and the Inscription* (raqīm) *were wonders among Our signs?*

Ḥusbān means "thinking." A *kahf* is a mountain cave, but it is bigger than a *ghār* (grotto). If it is small, it is called a *ghār*. *Al-Raqīm*, which

comes from the word *raqm*, means "writing" or "inscription." It is an object (in the *faʿīl* form), similar to *jarīh* (wounded) and *qatīl* (killed). *ʿAjab* is a verbal noun meaning *taʿajjub* (amazement). It is used to express an exaggerated adjectival meaning.

The apparent context of the story reveals that the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription were a group of people who were prominent in their nations, and the story is about all of them. They are the ones who are called *aṣḥāb al-kahf* (Companions of the Cave) and *aṣḥāb al-raqīm* (Companions of the Inscription). They are called Companions of the Cave (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*) because they went into the cave (*kahf*), and because of what happened to them in it.

They are called the Companions of the Inscription (*aṣḥāb al-raqīm*) because their story was inscribed on a plaque hung up or kept in the king's archive. Alternatively, it is said that al-Raqīm was the name of the mountain (where the cave was) or that it was the name of the valley where the mountain was. It is also said that it was the name of the place that they fled to before they took refuge in the cave, or that it is the name of the dog which accompanied them. This makes a total of five possible interpretations. The first interpretation is favored in the forthcoming discussion on the story.

A further alternative interpretation is that the Companions of the Inscription were different people from the Companions of the Cave and they had a different story; God mentioned them along with the Companions of the Cave but did not relate their story. While a story has been narrated about them, and we will discuss it in the upcoming section on narrations, it is extremely unlikely that God, with His eloquence, would mention both groups, only to go into detail about one of them and fail to address the other, either briefly or in detail. Furthermore, the story that is narrated about the People of the Inscription does not fit the preceding context which made it appropriate to mention the story of the Companions of the Cave.

When connected with the other verses, it is clear that this verse means: "Nay, you thought that the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription—whom God caused to sleep for hundreds of years and then awakened, while they thought they had tarried for a day or part of a day—were among Our wondrous signs? This was not at all amazing. The general human condition—their fascination with worldly adornments, their obliviousness to

the hereafter, and their own resurrection, when they will realize that they did not tarry long in this world—this is a perpetual sign of God similar to that of the Companions of the Cave."

As mentioned above, the context shows that this story was known to the Prophet before it was revealed; the revelation provided the details. This verse supports this inference, especially because it is followed by three verses summarizing the story and referring to its salient points which would lead a person to think that it was an amazing and rare sign.

إِذْ أَوَى ٱلْفِتْيَةُ إِلَى ٱلْكَهْفِ فَقَالُوا۟ رَبَّنَآ ءَاتِنَا مِن لَّدُنكَ رَحْمَةً وَهَيِّئْ لَنَا مِنْ أَمْرِنَا رَشَدًا ﴿١٠﴾

(18:10) ***When the youths sought refuge in the cave, they said: Our Lord! Grant us mercy from You, and provide for us a right course in our affair.***

Awī means "returning"—not every kind of returning; rather, it refers to a person or an animal returning to a place where he/she/it settles or feels secure. *Fitya* is an oral plural (*jamʿ samāʿī*) of *fatā* (a youth), and the word is not without a certain laudatory flavor of praise.

Tahīʾa means "preparation." Al-Bayḍāwī says: "The root meaning of *tahīʾa* is bringing about the form of a thing."

Rashad or *rushd* means being guided to something which is sought. Al-Rāghib says: "*Rushd* (rectitude) is the opposite of *ghayy* (misguidance), and it is used in the same way as the word *hidaya* (guidance)."

The sentence [their prayer], *they said: Our Lord! Grant us mercy from You*, begins with the conjunction *fāʾ* to indicate the sequence of events (*tafrīʿ*)—namely, that they performed their prayer after they sought refuge—as if their power were stripped from them, and they could not do anything about their situation. This interpretation is more likely because they said "from You." Had they not run out of options and means, and had despair not surrounded them, they would not have emphasized that the mercy they sought would come from Him alone; otherwise, they would have (simply) said, "Lord! Grant us mercy" (*ātinā raḥma*), as did others: *. . . Our Lord! Grant us goodness in this world . . .* (2:201)*; . . . Our Lord! And grant us what You have promised us by Your messengers. . .* (3:194).

Since "mercy" (*raḥma*) is qualified with (the specification) "from

You," what is meant by it is divine support because there is no supporter other than Him.

Alternatively, the mercy—which is qualified as being sought from Him alone—could be gifts or blessings which can only come from the Almighty, such as the guidance which is explicitly said to be from Him in various places in the Qur'an. The specification "from You" suggests this is the case, and this interpretation is strengthened by the prayer of those firmly rooted in knowledge, which says something similar: *Our Lord! Cause not our hearts to deviate after You have guided us aright, and grant us mercy from You . . .* (3:8).

After all, they did not ask for anything else other than guidance.

And provide for us a right course in our affair: "Our affair" refers to their specific circumstances; that is, they fled from a people who chased after the believers, spilling their blood and forcing them to worship deities other than God. They sought refuge in the cave not knowing what would happen to them and not knowing which path to take to save themselves. Thus, it becomes clear that *rushd* means choosing the right path to save themselves.

Based on the first interpretation of "mercy" (mentioned above), the entire phrase, *and provide for us a right course in our affair*, acts as a conjunction to [the clause], *grant us mercy from You*. Based on the second interpretation, it is a second plea following the first plea.

فَضَرَبْنَا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاذَانِهِمْ فِى ٱلْكَهْفِ سِنِينَ عَدَدًا ﴿١١﴾

(18:11) *Then We veiled* (ḍarabnā) *their hearing for numbered years in the cave.*

Al-Kashshāf says:

> "It means, We put a veil over them preventing them from hearing and caused them to sleep so heavily that they could not be awoken by voices, as you see with a heavy sleeper who hears nothing when he is shouted at and cannot be woken up. The implied object—the veil (*al-ḥijāb*) is omitted, as when one says *banā ʿalā imraʾatihi* (he built over his wife), meaning that he built a dome-shaped edifice over (the grave of) his wife (*banā ʿalā imraʾatihi al-qubba*)."

Majmaʿ al-bayān says:

> "It means, 'We overcame them with sleep'—which is an extremely

> eloquent form of expression. One says *ḍarabahu Allāh bi-l-fālij* (God struck him with paralysis) when God afflicts someone with paralysis. Quṭrub said: 'It is like what the Arabs say: *ḍaraba al-amīr ʿalā yad fulān* (the commander smote so-and-so's hand) when he stops him from acting.' Al-Aswad b. Yaʿfur, who was blind, said: 'And of events, do not think that the earth has set obstacles for me (*ḍarabat ʿalayya al-arḍ bi-l-asdādi*).' He further said: 'This is one of the Qur'an's eloquent linguistic usages which cannot be translated with a meaning that corresponds exactly to the wording.'"

The meaning he stated is more eloquent than that of al-Zamakhsharī.

There is a third possible meaning, even though they did not mention it, namely, one that alludes to what women do to make their children sleep; that is, gently tapping their ears with their hands or fingertips so that their senses focus on it and they fall asleep. Likewise, the phrase (that is, *We veiled their hearing*) implies how He tenderly and lovingly eased them to sleep for many years like a nursing mother would do with her suckling infant.

Sinīn ʿadadan—is an adverbial phrase describing *ḍarabnā* (lit. "We smote"). *ʿAdad* is a verbal noun like *ʿiddun* (counting), so all together this means "numbered years." Alternatively, it is said that the word annexed (the *muḍāf*) has been omitted and, with it, it would read *dhawāt ʿadad* (lit. "having numbers").

Al-Kashshāf says:

> "Describing the years as *ʿadadan* could mean either that there were many years or few years because, before Him, many are few, as in His words: . . . *they had not stayed but an hour* (illā sāʿatan) *of the day* . . . (10:45). Al-Zajjāj said that if there is a small quantity of something, its amount is clearly understood and there is no need for it to be measured, but if there is a large quantity of something, it has to be measured (or numbered)."

The description *ʿadadan* could mean that when something becomes numerous, it is difficult to count, so it is not normally counted. Thus, describing the years as *ʿadadan* could imply they were few and easily counted. He said: *Then they sold him for a paltry price, a handful of counted dirhams* (darāhima maʿdūda) . . . (12:20), meaning "a few dirhams."[1]

1 In reference to the story of Joseph (Yūsuf). (Ed.)

The years are described as ʿ*adadan* to show that they were few in number, a meaning which is appropriate to the context discussed above. The words are coined with the aim to refute the idea that their story is the most amazing. It is therefore appropriate to consider the number of years (they remained in the cave) to be few and not many.

The meaning of the verse is clear; that is, it indicates that throughout their time in the cave, they were asleep and not dead.

ثُمَّ بَعَثْنَٰهُمْ لِنَعْلَمَ أَىُّ ٱلْحِزْبَيْنِ أَحْصَىٰ لِمَا لَبِثُوٓا۟ أَمَدًا ﴿١٢﴾

(18:12) ***Then We rouse them up*** **(baʿathnāhum)** ***so that We might know*** **(li-naʿlam)** ***which of the two parties would reckon the time*** **(amadan)** ***for which they had remained.***

Baʿth here means "waking up" and not "resurrecting" as can be understood from the context of the previous verse.

Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī says that *ḥizb* means "a group with some fierceness." He (also) says:

> "*Al-amad* (duration) and *al-abad* (eternity) are almost identical in meaning. However, *al-abad* is used for a time span which has no limit and is unrestricted. One cannot use *abad* for the duration of something. *Al-amad* implies an unknown but limited duration if it is not qualified. It can be qualified; for instance, discussing something's *amad* is the same as discussing its *zamān* (time). The difference between *amad* and *zaman* is that *amad* refers to an end, whereas *zamān* can refer either to a beginning or an end. That is why some say that *madā* and *amad* mean roughly the same thing."

The knowledge meant (in the clause, *so that We might know*) is actual knowledge; that is, something that becomes apparent and present precisely as it is in God's sight. Knowledge in this sense appears frequently in the Qur'an, such as: *. . . so that God may know* (li-yaʿlama) *who helps Him and His messengers in the unseen . . .* (57:25) and *So that He may know* (li-yaʿlama) *that they have truly delivered the messages of their Lord . . .* (72:28).

This is what some (of the exegetes) imply when they say, by way of exegesis, that the clause means "to manifest what We already know."

So that We might know (li-naʿlama) *which of the two parties* (al-ḥizbayn) *would reckon* (aḥṣā) *the time* (amadan) *for which they remained* (li-mā

labithū), is the reason for their awakening. *Li* indicates purpose. *Al-ḥizbayn* means "two groups of the Companions of the Cave" because after being awoken, God says: *A speaker among them said: How long have you tarried? They said: We have tarried for a day or part of a day. (Others) said: Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried.* This (explanation) is according to what He states in the following sentence, *Thus did We rouse them up (from sleep) so that they might question each other.*

Someone else has said that *al-ḥizbayn* refers to two groups from their people—namely, the believers and the unbelievers, as if they disagreed over how long they had tarried. Some of them reckoned correctly, and some of them did not; therefore, God awoke them to make it clear and apparent. Accordingly, this interpretation would mean: "We awoke them to show which of the two disputing groups—the believers and the unbelievers—is right in what they say." However, this is an unlikely explanation. *Aḥṣā* (would reckon) is a verb in the past tense from the verbal noun *al-iḥṣāʾ* (reckoning) and *amadan* (the time) is the object of the verb. It is likely *li-mā labithū* (for which they remained) qualifies *amadan*. *Mā* is a relative pronoun in an either/or sense, indicating which of the two groups reckoned how long they had tarried.

Alternatively, it is said that *aḥṣā* is a comparative adjective derived from the verbal noun *iḥṣāʾ* (reckoning) and formed by eliminating its additional letters (*bi ḥadhf al-zawāʾid*)—like when they say, "he is better (*aḥṣā*) at counting money" or "he is more bankrupt (*aflas*) than Ibn al-Mudhalliq"[1] and that *amadan* is the object of a verb alluded to by *aḥṣā*. However, this involves some affectation. There are other opinions on this matter.

Three verses [relate to this matter]:

(18:10-12) *When the youths sought refuge in the cave, they said: Our Lord! Grant us mercy from You, and provide for us a right course in our affair. Then We veiled their hearing many years in the Cave. Then We roused them up so that We might know which of the two parties would reckon the time for which they had remained.*

When the youths returned to the cave, they asked their Lord: "Lord,

1 According to *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, Ibn al-Mudhalliq was from the ʿAbd Shams clan. Neither he, his father, nor his forefathers could find a home for the night. Thereafter, a saying developed: "more bankrupt than Ibn al-Mudhalliq" (*aflas min Ibn al-Mudhalliq*). (Trans.)

grant us from You something which will keep up safe from what we are threatened with—choosing between worshiping other deities or being killed—and grant us guidance in our affair so that we can be guided by it to salvation." So God made them fall asleep in the cave for a limited number of years then awakened them to show which of the two groups would reckon how long they had tarried.

As you can see, these three verses summarize their story, alluding thereby to the aspect of their affair being one of the signs of God and one of awe. The first verse alludes to their entering the cave and asking to be rescued, the second to their sleeping there for a limited number of years, and the third to their waking up, becoming aware, and disagreeing among themselves over how long they had tarried.

There are three central points to their story, each of which is incorporated in these three verses. The subsequent verses, which tell their story in detail, follow in the same vein. The only difference is that they add some of what happened, such as that their secret had been revealed—people had found out about them. This is alluded to by the sentence, *And thus did We make (people) learn of them*, and the verses continuing to the end of the narration of their story.

The salient points of their story are related in detail, beginning with the verse, *We relate to you their story with truth*, (and continuing to the end of that section).

نَّحۡنُ نَقُصُّ عَلَيۡكَ نَبَأَهُم بِٱلۡحَقِّۚ إِنَّهُمۡ فِتۡيَةٌ ءَامَنُواْ بِرَبِّهِمۡ وَزِدۡنَٰهُمۡ هُدٗى ١٣

(18:13) ***We relate to you their story with truth; surely they were youths who believed in their Lord and We increased them in guidance*** **(hudā).**

This is the beginning of the detailed description of the issues related to their story.

The clause, surely they were youths who believed in their Lord, means they had belief which was pleasing to their Lord. Otherwise, belief would not have been attributed to them.

Guidance (*hudā*) comes after basic faith and comes with an increase in the level of belief through which a person is guided to everything which

results in God's pleasure. God has said: *O you who believe! Be careful of (your duty to) God and believe in His Messenger: He will give you double portions of His mercy and will make for you a light with which you will walk* (57:28).

وَرَبَطْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ إِذْ قَامُوا فَقَالُوا رَبُّنَا رَبُّ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَن
نَّدْعُوَ مِن دُونِهِ إِلَٰهًا لَّقَدْ قُلْنَا إِذًا شَطَطًا ﴿١٤﴾ هَٰؤُلَاءِ قَوْمُنَا اتَّخَذُوا مِن
دُونِهِ آلِهَةً لَّوْلَا يَأْتُونَ عَلَيْهِم بِسُلْطَانٍ بَيِّنٍ فَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَىٰ
عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا ﴿١٥﴾ وَإِذِ اعْتَزَلْتُمُوهُمْ وَمَا يَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ فَأْوُوا إِلَى
الْكَهْفِ يَنشُرْ لَكُمْ رَبُّكُم مِّن رَّحْمَتِهِ وَيُهَيِّئْ لَكُم مِّنْ أَمْرِكُم
مِّرْفَقًا ﴿١٦﴾

(18:14–16) ***And We strengthened their hearts*** **(wa rabaṭnā ʿalā qulūbihim)** ***with patience, when they stood up and said: Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth; we will by no means call upon any god besides Him, indeed we should have said an extravagant thing*** **(shaṭaṭan)*****! These, our people, have taken gods besides Him; why do they not produce any clear authority*** **(sulṭān)** ***in their support? Who is then more unjust than one who forges a lie against God? And when you forsake them*** **(iʿtazaltumūhum)** ***and what they worship save God, betake yourselves for refuge to the cave; your Lord will shower*** **(yanshur)** ***His mercy on you and bring your affair toward comfort and ease*** **(mirfaqa).**

Rabṭ means "tying" and *rabṭ ʿalā l-qulūb* ("binding upon the hearts") is an allusion to removing worry and anxiety from them. *Shaṭaṭ* means "exceeding the limit" and "departing from the truth." *Sulṭān* means "evidence" or "proof."

These three verses relate to the first part of their dialogue, when they got up to defy and dispute with the idolaters: *They stood up and said: Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth . . . Who is then more unjust than one who forges a lie against God?*

Their speech was full of wisdom and understanding. They aimed to refute the divinity of the angels, jinn, and human reformers who were being worshiped. The idolatrous philosophy sought to prove the divinity

and lordship of these things, not of the idols themselves, which were just statues and images of the things which the masses called lords and gods. This is proven by the use of the word *ʿalayhim* because the pronoun, *hum* (them)—which is exclusively used for rational beings—refers to them.

They began by affirming God's Oneness by saying, *Our Lord is the Lord* (rabb) *of the heavens and the earth.* They attributed the Lordship (*rubūbiyya*) of everything to the One who has no partners, whereas idolatry attributes a god and a lord to each kind of creation—a sky god, an earth god, and a human god.

Then they emphasized that by saying, *We will by no means call upon any god besides Him.* This was to deny meta-gods: the gods which the idolaters place above the simple gods, such as the universal intellects worshiped by the Sabians; or Brahman, Shiva and Vishnu, who are worshiped by the Brahmans and Buddhists. They emphasized it again by saying, *for then indeed we should have said an extravagant thing*, indicating that calling on anyone else would be a transgression; it would exaggerate the right of a created being by elevating him to the level of the Creator.

They then turned their attention to their people and criticized them for worshiping things other than God—that is, through taking them as gods, by saying, *These, our people, have taken gods besides Him; why do they not produce any clear authority in their support?* Thus, they refuted what the idolaters claimed by showing that they had no proof supported by clear evidence for their claim.

What they refuted was the evidence that their people relied upon. Their people said that God was too sublime to be grasped by His creation, so it would not be possible to turn to Him in worship, nor could He be approached through servitude. They said that this left them no recourse but to worship some noble beings who were among those who were near Him so that, through them, they could come closer to Him. This [argument], however, was against them, for no one can ever fully comprehend Him—neither a human being nor one of His close servants whom they were worshiping. All of us, including them, only know Him by His names, attributes, and actions, each according to his ability, so everyone may turn to Him to worship Him at the level of their knowledge.

Nevertheless, all the attributes that make Him worthy of being worshiped—such as creating, sustaining, ruling, and managing—are His alone. None of them belong to anyone else, so He, and no one else, should be

worshiped.

They complemented what they said—that is, *Why do they not produce any clear authority in their support?*, with the statement, *Who, then, is more unjust than the one who forges a lie against God?* This closes the case against what they claimed. It means that they (the people) have to establish incontrovertible proof of what they say. If they cannot, then they are speaking about God without knowledge; in other words, falsely attributing things to Him. It is injustice to falsely attribute things to anyone, let alone to God, and injustice against God is the greatest of all.

Furthermore, through what they said, the youth proved that they acknowledged God and had insight into their religion, thus demonstrating the truth of God's words, *And We increased them in guidance.*

In spite of the brevity of these verses, they include expressions that reveal some details about the beginning of their movement. Thus, God's words, *And We strengthened their hearts*, show that what they said, *Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth*, was not whispered in the absence of the idol worshipers; rather, it was declared openly and loudly in a place where hearts melt away, souls are terrified, and skin crawls in the face of obstinate, bloodthirsty, sadistic, trying rulers.

Their statement, *We will by no means call upon any god besides Him*, which comes after, *Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth*, is a disavowal and rejection, and it indicates that they were being forced to worship idols and to call on other things than God.

The clause, when they stood up and said, indicates that they declared their opposition while they were in a council—such as a king's council or a general assembly—which had passed a decree to force people to worship idols and to forbid them from worshiping God, and had decided to implement this decree through killing and torture. Thus, they stood and announced their opposition. Then, threatened with grave danger, they left, forsaking their people. They were attacked from every angle, as indicated by the sentence, *and when you forsake them and what they worship save God, betake yourselves for refuge to the cave.*

This supports what the narrations say (which will be discussed subsequently), that six of them were some of the king's closest confidants whose counsel he sought in his affairs, but then they rose from the council, declared belief in the oneness of God, and denied that He has any partners.

It also does not contradict the (upcoming) narrations that they kept their belief secret and practiced dissimulation (*taqiyya*).[1] They could have done so before taking people by surprise by declaring their faith, then forsaking them without notice. They could not go about showing their faith publicly; doubtlessly, they would have been killed.

It may also be possible that *qāmū* ("they stood up" or "they rose") means that they rose up for God by way of their support of the truth; that is, their words, *Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth*, are something they uttered to themselves, and the words, *and when you forsake them*, are something they said after they left the city. Alternatively, what is meant is that they rose up for God, and everything they are quoted as saying is what they said among themselves after they left the city and steered clear of the people. Either way, what is meant by their hearts being strengthened is that they were not afraid of being punished for fleeing from the city, nor were they afraid of being banished by the people. However, the first explanation (mentioned above) appears to be more likely.

And when you forsake them **(iʿtazaltumūhum)** ***and what they worship save God, betake yourselves for refuge to the cave; your Lord will shower*** **(yanshur)** ***His mercy on you and bring your affair toward comfort and ease*** **(mirfaqa)*:*** *Iʿtizāl* and *taʿazzul* both mean "separating from something." *Nashr* means "unfolding." *Mirfaq* (the word used in the verse), *marfiq* and *marfaq* all mean "treating someone nicely."

The above is the second part of the dialogue which took place after they had left their people—after they had forsaken them and what they were worshiping other than God. They had separated themselves from everyone else, and some of them were suggesting that they should enter the cave and hide from the enemies of their religion.

Through divine guidance, they recognized that if they did this, God would treat them with His grace and mercy, which would include rescuing them from being dominated and oppressed by their people. The evidence in support of this is the resolution of their words, *Take refuge in the cave, and your Lord will unfold to you His mercy*, as opposed to saying, "That

1 *Taqiyya* means concealing one's conviction and faith from the enemies to avoid worldly, spiritual or religious harm. It has its root in the Qur'an and in the conduct of the Prophet's Companions; the Prophet's approval of it is a vivid testimony to its existence and permissibility during the early period of Islam. (Trans.)

perchance He *may* unfold to you His mercy" or, "Perhaps He may unfold to you His Mercy."

These two things which they recognized—mercy being extended and being provided with a profitable course are the two things they asked for after entering the cave when they said, as God relates, *Our Lord! Grant us mercy from You, and provide for us a right course in our affair.*

The exceptive[1] in the clause, *and what they worship save God*, is a discontinuous (*munqaṭiʿ*) exceptive because the idolaters did not worship God along with all their other gods, in which case the exceptive would exclude some of those originally included within the generality, that is, be continuous (*muttaṣil*). Some (exegetes) claim that the polytheists worshiped God *and* worshiped idols like other polytheists do. Other exegetes claim that perhaps that some of the polytheists worshiped God as well as worshiping idols. In either case, the exceptive would be continuous. However, both the claims are inappropriate. This is because the idolaters were never known to worship God along with the idols. Their philosophy would not allow it, and we alluded to their pretext for that above.

۞وَتَرَى ٱلشَّمۡسَ إِذَا طَلَعَت تَّزَٰوَرُ عَن كَهۡفِهِمۡ ذَاتَ ٱلۡيَمِينِ وَإِذَا غَرَبَت
تَّقۡرِضُهُمۡ ذَاتَ ٱلشِّمَالِ وَهُمۡ فِي فَجۡوَةٖ مِّنۡهُۚ ذَٰلِكَ مِنۡ ءَايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِۗ مَن يَهۡدِ
ٱللَّهُ فَهُوَ ٱلۡمُهۡتَدِۖ وَمَن يُضۡلِلۡ فَلَن تَجِدَ لَهُۥ وَلِيّٗا مُّرۡشِدٗا ١٧ وَتَحۡسَبُهُمۡ
أَيۡقَاظٗا وَهُمۡ رُقُودٞۚ وَنُقَلِّبُهُمۡ ذَاتَ ٱلۡيَمِينِ وَذَاتَ ٱلشِّمَالِۖ وَكَلۡبُهُم بَٰسِطٞ
ذِرَاعَيۡهِ بِٱلۡوَصِيدِۚ لَوِ ٱطَّلَعۡتَ عَلَيۡهِمۡ لَوَلَّيۡتَ مِنۡهُمۡ فِرَارٗا وَلَمُلِئۡتَ مِنۡهُمۡ
رُعۡبٗا ١٨

(18:17–18) ***And you might see how, when the sun rose, it would decline* (tazāwaru) *from their cave toward the right hand***

1 There are three types of exceptive expressions in Arabic grammar. The first, when both the main noun and the excepted noun represent the same kind or type, is known as the continuous exceptive. The second type, when the main noun represents a different type or kind from the excepted noun, is known as the discontinuous exceptive. The third type is known as an emptied (*mufarragh*) exceptive, and can be seen when the main noun is deleted and only the excepted noun is mentioned. (Ed.)

> **(dhāt al-yamīn)**, ***and when it set, it would leave them behind*** **(taqriḍuhum)** ***on the left*** **(dhāt al-shimāl)**, ***as they were in a wide space thereof. This is (one) of the signs of God; whomever God guides, he is the rightly guided one, and whomever He causes to err, you shall not find for him any friend to lead (him) to the right course. You would have deemed them awake, while they were asleep, and We turned them about to the right and to the left, their dog stretching forth his two forelegs on the threshold: If you had come upon them, you certainly would have run from them and have been filled with terror.***

Tazāwur means "inclining." It is derived from *zawar* which means "slanting." *Qarḍ* means "cutting," and a *fajwa* is a wide tract of land or the courtyard of a house. *Dhāt al-yamīn* and *dhāt al-shimāl* mean the side beyond the right and left, or the side which bears the name of the right or left; that is, the right and left hand sides.

These two verses vividly describe the cave, their settling in it, their appearance and the changing conditions around them during the days they tarried there, asleep. The Prophet is addressed in the second person but not in his own personal capacity; rather, it is in his capacity as a listener. This is common in speech. Second person usage of this sort applies to any listener without being restricted to any particular addressee.

The words, *And you might see how, when the sun rose, it would decline from their cave toward the right hand, and when it set, it would leave them behind on the left, as they were in a wide space thereof*, describe the cave's position and their position in it while they were asleep. It is enough to mention what was alluded to in the preceding verses regarding their sleep and tarrying; the explanation of the verse, *and they remained in their cave. . .*, will follow.

The verse means that if—hypothetically—you and everyone else were to look at them in the cave, you would see the sun rise with its rays shining to the right, away from the cave; and you would see it set with its rays disappearing to the left; and you would see them in a wide space inside the cave, untouched by the sun.

With this, God indicates that the cave was neither facing east nor west; otherwise, the sun's rays would shine on them at only one of these two times. Instead, it was on the north–south axis, with its entrance facing either the north or south. The sun's rays shone onto the sides of the cave

at sunrise and sunset, but the sun did not shine on them because they were inside the cave. Thus, God protected them from being harmed by the heat of the sun—from their skin being burnt or their clothes becoming faded. Indeed, they were comfortable when they were asleep; they enjoyed a breeze at sunrise and sunset while they were in a wide tract (*fajwa*) of the cave. Since *fajwa* is indefinite, it may imply that a descriptive clause has been omitted; that is, "while they were in a wide tract (*fajwa*) of the cave without the sun's rays shining on them."

Exegetes say that the cave's opening was toward the North facing the stars on the handle of the Big Dipper (*banāt naʿsh*). They say that its right side faced west, with the sun's rays shining on it at sunrise; and its left side faced east, with the sun's rays shining on it at sunset. This is based on the assumption that the right and left hand sides of the cave are described from the perspective of someone entering the cave. Perhaps this is because they are relying on the commonly held view that the cave is in Ephesus, one of the eastern Byzantine cities, because the opening of the cave there faces toward the North, inclining a little to the east, as is said.

However, for a cave, house, encampment, or anything else that has an entrance, right and left are usually determined by the perspective of someone exiting and not entering, because when people first felt the need to think about directions, they thought about directions in relation to themselves. So people called what was beyond their heads "high" or "above"; what was beyond their feet "low" or "below"; what was before their face, the "front"; and, the opposite of that, the "back." They called the side that their dominant hand was on "right," and the other side "left." Then, when the need arose to think about a thing's sides, they put themselves in the thing's place. Whichever of its sides corresponded with a face—the side with which the object faces other objects—became the "front"; the one behind it became its back, the one corresponding to a person's right became its "right," and the one corresponding to a person's left became its "left."

Because the front of a house, homestead, encampment or anything else which has an entrance is the side the entrance is on, right and left are determined from the point of view of someone exiting, not entering, the door. Thus, the cave is described by the verse as facing south, with its opening facing the South; and it is not as they (the exegetes) claim. There is more to say on this, and it will follow, God willing.

In any event, they remained under the care of and in the grace of God, who kept them alive until their decreed lifespan reached its end. There is an allusion to this later.

***This is (one) of the signs of God; whomever God guides, he is the rightly guided one, and whomever He causes to err, you shall not find for him any friend to lead (him) to the right course. And you would have deemed them awake* (ayqāẓan) *while they were asleep* (ruqūd):** *Ayqāẓ* is the plural of *yaqīẓ* or *yaqẓān* meaning "awake," while *ruqūd* is the plural of *rāqid* meaning "asleep." This suggests that while they were asleep, their eyes were open, as if they were awake.

The words, *And We turned them about to the right and to the left*, means: "We turned them over, sometimes from the right side to the left side, and sometimes from the left side to the right side, in order to stop the earth from consuming them, their clothes from decaying, or their bodily strength from waning as they lingered there, unmoving."

***While their dog (lay) outstretching his two forelegs at the threshold* (waṣīd):** A *waṣīd* is said to be the courtyard or doorstep of a house. It means that they were as described, while their dog was lying down stretching its paws out in the open space inside the cave. It informs us that they had a dog which kept close to them and tarried with them throughout their sojourn in the cave.

The words, *If you had come upon them, you certainly would have run from them and have been filled with terror*, explains that they had a terrifying appearance. If someone chanced upon them, he or she would flee in horror and in anticipation of something abhorrent from them; fear and dread would fill that person's heart with terror, which would spread to every limb, which would then, too, be filled with terror.

What can be said about the use of the second person in (the clauses), *you would certainly turn back*, and, *you would certainly be filled*, is similar to what was said about it in relation to the clause, *and you might see the sun. . .*

What was said above explains two things:

(1) The reason for saying, *and you would certainly be filled with terror*, instead of saying "and your *heart* would certainly be filled with terror" and

(2) The reason for arranging the two phrases in the order: *if you looked at them you would certainly turn back from them in flight*,

followed by, *you would certainly be filled with terror because of them*.

People flee from something abhorrent because they anticipate danger (from it), not because they have fear or agitation in the heart. Fleeing or distancing oneself from unpleasantness to avoid it is the effect of anticipating danger (from it) and not the effect of terror, which is fear and agitation in the heart. Impending danger necessitates flight, with or without terror.

Thus putting "fleeing" before "terror" is not putting the cause before the effect; rather, it is putting the measure which must be taken in a fearful situation (*ḥukm al-khawf*) before terror—fear and terror being two different states of the heart. If there were terror instead of fear, it would be correct to put the second phrase first and the first second. However, based on what we have said, mentioning the fearful situation before the actual terror—even though they are both effects of looking at their dreadful, unsettling appearance—is better and more eloquent. This is because fleeing is more indicative of that [the fearful situation] than being filled with terror.

وَكَذَٰلِكَ بَعَثْنَٰهُمْ لِيَتَسَآءَلُوا۟ بَيْنَهُمْ ۚ قَالَ قَآئِلٌ مِّنْهُمْ كَمْ لَبِثْتُمْ ۖ قَالُوا۟ لَبِثْنَا
يَوْمًا أَوْ بَعْضَ يَوْمٍ ۚ قَالُوا۟ رَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثْتُمْ فَٱبْعَثُوٓا۟ أَحَدَكُم
بِوَرِقِكُمْ هَٰذِهِۦٓ إِلَى ٱلْمَدِينَةِ فَلْيَنظُرْ أَيُّهَآ أَزْكَىٰ طَعَامًا فَلْيَأْتِكُم بِرِزْقٍ
مِّنْهُ وَلْيَتَلَطَّفْ وَلَا يُشْعِرَنَّ بِكُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿١٩﴾ إِنَّهُمْ إِن يَظْهَرُوا۟ عَلَيْكُمْ
يَرْجُمُوكُمْ أَوْ يُعِيدُوكُمْ فِى مِلَّتِهِمْ وَلَن تُفْلِحُوٓا۟ إِذًا أَبَدًا ﴿٢٠﴾

(18:19–20) ***Thus did We rouse them up*** **(from sleep)** ***so that they might question each other*** **(li-yatasāʾalū).** ***A speaker among them said: How long have you tarried? They said: We have tarried for a day or part of a day. (Others) said: Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried. Now send one of you with this silver (coin) of yours to the city, then let him see which of them has the best food, so let him bring you provision from it, and let him behave with gentleness, and by no means should you make your case known to anyone. For surely if they prevail against you*** **(yaẓharū ʿalaykum),** ***they will stone you to death, or force you back into their religion, and then you will never succeed.***

Tasāʾul means "asking each other." *Wariq* (spelled with a *fatḥa* followed by a *kasra*) means "dirhams." It is said that it means either minted or unminted silver coins. *In yaẓharū ʿalaykum* means either "if they find out about you" or "if they prevail against you." *And thus did We rouse them up*, implies they had been asleep (in the way portrayed in the preceding verses), and this verse (18:19) means: "Just as We caused them to sleep for a long time in this perplexing and amazing state, which was one of Our signs, so too did We awaken them so they would question each other."

Given their prayer when they entered the cave, and the sleep that followed soon afterwards, this simile shows that they were awakened so they would question each other and the truth of the matter would become apparent to them. They were only caused to sleep and remained asleep for a long time so they would be awakened. As an act of mercy and to offer right guidance, God made them sleep after their prayer and petition. For they were bothered by the unbelief that had taken hold of their society: the prevalence of falsehood and the violence and tyranny that surrounded them. They were assailed by despondency and had despaired of the truth ever prevailing or religious people ever having freedom of religion. Hence, they reckoned that falsehood would long prevail on earth as did he [*ʿUzayr*]: (2:259) . . . *who passed by a town, and it had fallen down upon its roofs; he said: When will God give it life after its death? So God caused him to die for a hundred years then raised him to life* . . . (2:259).

In short, when these suppositions overwhelmed them, and despair overtook them, God made them sleep for a number of years before He awakened them so that they would ask each other (how long they had been asleep) and after that, reply, *a day or part of a day*. Then, it would become apparent to them that hundreds of years had passed, and that many things had changed.

From a different perspective, these hundreds of years were meant to seem just like a day or part of a day so that they would realize that it did not matter whether the time was long or short; this had nothing to do with truth being destroyed or falsehood sustained. Instead, it was God who made everything on the earth an embellishment for it, drew mankind to the earth, and made eons and days pass, *in order to try them (as to) which of them is best in deeds*. The world's only function is to tempt those who pursue it with its embellishment, to tempt those who cling to the earth and follow their desires.

This is a reality which continues to elude man so long as he remains attached to his days which have passed and to what has happened to him—sweet, bitter, or serious—like a person who turns in his sleep or slumbers for the like of a day. Only the intoxication of desire and occupation with the world's vanity prevent him from turning to the truth and following it. However, God has a day for humankind in which no embellishment or adornment of the world will distract them from witnessing this truth—the day of their death. As ʿAlī said: "People are asleep. When they die, they wake up." That day is the day the world's expanse and embellishment will be folded up, and the world of humankind will be done away with, completely extinguished. It is clear from the above that the clause, *so that they might question each other*, explains why they were awakened. *Li* (so) in *li-yatasāʾalū* indicates reason or purpose. It is also consistent with the previously stated purpose, *then We roused them up so that We might know which of the two parties would reckon the time for which they remained*.

Some have said that just part of the purpose was stated because it obviously implies all the other consequences of the awakening—it is as if what is being said is: "So that they would ask each other, and so that what happened to them would be exposed: the sign would be revealed, and divine power would become apparent." However, there is no evidence for this view in the wording of the Book, and it sounds contrived.

Others say that *li* in *li-yatasāʾalū* (so that they might question each other) indicates the *consequence* (of being awoken), not the *purpose*. They believe it is unlikely that their asking each other questions—an insignificant thing—was the purpose of their being awakened, which was a great sign. The problem with this interpretation is that it does not suffice to disprove the view that they were awakened in order to ask each other. This is because, just as something which is quite insignificant should not be made the *purpose* of something significant, or of a tremendous sign, it is equally inappropriate to say that something frivolous is the *consequence* of something which is a great sign. Nevertheless, you already know from our explanation the real purpose of their being awakened; that is, so that they might ask each other how long they tarried.

The words, *A speaker among them said: For how long have you tarried?,* proves that the person asking the question was one of them speaking to the rest, asking how long they had remained asleep in the cave. It is as if the questioner felt that they had tarried for a long time on account of

the languor of heavy sleep they felt after waking up; that is why he asked, *How long have you tarried?*

They said: We have tarried for a day or part of a day, (shows) they wavered between a day and part of a day in their answer, as if they were basing their answer on what they saw—the change in the area where the sun shone—as if they had started sleeping at the beginning of the day and woke up in the middle, or at the end of it; then they were not sure whether a night had passed, meaning that they had stayed a day, or not a day but part of a day. They wavered between "a day" and "part of a day" in their reply, but, in any event, it is the same answer.

Some say that based on the above the hesitation must be between "part of a day" and "a day and part of a day," not between "a day" and "part of a day." Therefore, the function of *aw* (or) is to divide them into two groups, meaning some of them (the youths) said, "We tarried for a day"; and others said, "We tarried for part of a day."

This interpretation should be disregarded, first, because it does not derive from the context of the wording, *We have tarried for a day or part of a day*. A single person had given the exact same reply elsewhere (in the Qur'an): . . . *He said: How long have you tarried? He said: I have tarried a day, or a part of a day* . . . (2:259).

Second, what they said, *We have tarried for a day or part of a day*, is based on what was apparent to them; and this they relied on as evidence because they were above speaking randomly, rashly, or while hallucinating. Some of the physical things which a person—especially one who has slept and then wakes up—relies on as evidence, such as the sun, shade, light, or darkness, do not measure whole days without a margin of error either way. This applies both to interpreting what was said as wavering and interpreting it as a split in opinion. In any event, what is meant by "a day" is slightly more than a night followed by its day, and it is common usage. The words, (Others) *said: Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried*, means that others among them said this in reply to those who said, *We have tarried for a day or part of a day*. If it were not in reply to that, they would have said: "Our Lord knows best how long we have tarried".

Thus, it is clear that when they attributed knowledge to God by saying, *Your Lord knows best*, this was not just a demonstration of good manners, as some people claim; rather, this was said to demonstrate one of the truths of *tawḥīd* (pure monotheism): that knowledge, in the true

sense of the word, is God's alone, for a person is veiled from everything beyond his own soul. He owns nothing beyond his own self (and owns that only by the permission of God). He can only comprehend things through his own self. He can only attain knowledge of anything beyond his self through external evidence, and only to the degree that it shows anything to him. True knowledge—namely, comprehending the essence of things and events themselves—is God's alone. He encompasses and witnesses everything. Innumerable verses indicate this reality.

Thus, a monotheist who acknowledges the position (*maqām*) of the Lord has no choice but to surrender to Him and attribute all knowledge to Him without attributing any perfection—like knowledge or power to himself apart from what he is forced to. So, he begins by mentioning his Lord and attributes true perfection to Him, and then, he only attributes to himself what God has given him to own and what He has authorized for him—as He says: (He) *Taught humankind what they knew not* (96:5), and *They said: Glory be to You! We have no knowledge but that which You have taught us . . .* (2:32) There are many other such verses.

Hence it appears that those [among them] who said, *Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried*, had a higher level of knowledge than those who said, *We have tarried for a day or part of a day*. They simply did not want to demonstrate good manners, otherwise, they would have just said: "Our Lord knows best how long we have tarried." Also, they would not have been one of the two groups whom God referred to in the preceding verses by saying, *Then We roused them up so that We might know which of the two parties would (more accurately) reckon the time for which they remained*, because demonstrating good manners cannot be called "guessing" or "reckoning," nor can someone who does that be said to be "guessing" or "reckoning."

It also appears that those who said, *Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried*, were not the same as those who said, *We have tarried a day, or part of a day*, because the context is one of debate or response (as has been discussed), which means that those who spoke up second could not have been the same as those who spoke up first. Had they been the exact same people, it would have been correct for them to have said: "Our Lord knows best how long we have tarried" instead of "Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried."

Thus, it can be inferred that there were seven or more of them because

the statement says *qāla* (he said) once and *qālū* (they said) twice. The plural [form] refers to a minimum of three so there were no fewer than seven of them.

The sentence, *Now send one of you with this silver (coin) of yours to the city, then let him see which of them has the best food* (azkā ṭaʿāman)*, so let him bring you provision from it* (minhu), is part of the conclusion to their debate. It contains an instruction or suggestion to send one of them as a messenger to the city to bring food for them. The pronoun *hā* in *ayyuhā* (which of them) refers to the city. What it means is "its inhabitants," as is sanctioned by common usage.

Zakāʾ al-ṭaʿām means "the goodness of the food." Alternatively, it is said to mean permissible (*ḥalāl*) or pure (*ṭāhir*) food. In the superlative degree (which is used here), it means the "best food"—and it still carries a sense of the first meaning.

The pronoun *hu* in *minhu* (from it) refers to the food, as is understood from the wording. Alternatively, it is said to refer to the "*best food*" (*azkā ṭaʿāman*). *Min* (from) can be either locative or partitive. It has also been claimed that the pronoun *hu* refers to the silver coin (*wariq*) and that *min* is partitive. However this is unlikely because it would require inferring another pronoun to refer to the previous clause. Furthermore, while *hu* is a masculine pronoun, *wariq* (silver coin) was qualified by a feminine demonstrative pronoun (*bi wariqikum hādhihi*) earlier on.

And let him behave with gentleness* (wal yatalaṭaf)*, and by no means make your case known to anyone: *Talaṭuf* means exercising and exhibiting gentleness and kindness. Thus (the clause), *and by no means make your case known to anyone*, is an explanatory clause introduced by a conjunction, meaning, as per the context: "Let him exercise gentleness with the people of the city in going, coming, and dealing with them in order to avoid any quarrel or dispute which would lead them to know your case and make them aware of you." Alternatively, it is said to mean, *and let him exercise gentleness*, only in *dealing* with them, but the unqualified nature of the wording refutes that.

For surely if they prevail against you, they would stone you to death, or force you back to their religion, and then you will never succeed, is the reason for advising the person to behave with gentleness and an explanation of the wisdom in doing so.

Ẓahara ʿalā shayʾ means "looking at and knowing about something" or

"prevailing against something." The verse has been explained. According to al-Rāghib, the word comes from *ẓahr*, meaning a person's back, the opposite of his stomach (*baṭn*). That was the original meaning. Thereafter, it was borrowed to refer to the earth; so, *ẓahr al-arḍ* (the face of the earth) is said to be the opposite of the hidden depths (*baṭn*) of the earth. Hence, *ẓuhūr* (appearance) is said to be the opposite of *buṭūn* (being hidden) because of the normal concomitance between (a) being on the face of the earth and being seen or looked at, (b) being on the face of the earth and attainment, and (c) being on the face of the earth and overcoming. Thus, one says *ẓahara ʿalayhi* to mean (a) he looked at it and knew its position, (b) he attained it, or (c) he overwhelmed it. Thereafter, further forms were derived, such as *aẓhara* (he displayed), *ẓāhara* (he helped), *taẓāhara* (he manifested), and *istaẓhara* (he sought help).

The likely meaning of *yaẓharu ʿalaykum* from the context is "*becoming familiar with you*" and "knowing your (hiding) place." This is the most comprehensive meaning because those people (the inhabitants of the city) had strength and power—and the youths had fled and remained in hiding. So if the people saw them, they would prevail over them and defeat them as they had wished to do.

Yarjumūkum means "they will stone you to death." It is the worst way to be killed, and it inspires a sense of antipathy and repulsion. Choosing stoning over other ways of killing indicates that all the people of the city opposed their religion. Therefore, if they were to be seen, the people would rush out and join in to kill them. This type of killing is typically carried out by stoning.

Or force you back to their religion* (aw yuʿidūkum fī millatihim)*: It is likely that *iʿāda* implies forcing them back in, as opposed to simply returning them, and this is the reason it is suffixed with *fī* (in) rather than *ilā* (to).

Had they returned to the people's religion—a religion that they had publicly rejected, a religion which they had called a "grievous word" and a "lie against God," their people would not have been satisfied with them simply declaring their beliefs or going through the motions. They would have had to join in with the people, worshiping idols and performing all the people's religious rites, and they would have been prohibited from performing any of the religious practices of God's religion or uttering a word of the truth.

Both reason and textual evidence indicate that there is no harm in

this for someone who is forced by circumstances to stay in pagan lands (*bilād al-kufr*) and who is trapped among their people like an enfeebled prisoner. God has said: *. . . not he who is compelled while his heart is at rest on account of faith . . .* (16:106), and *. . . but you should guard yourselves against them, guarding carefully. . .* (3:28).

Such a person may believe in his heart but deny his belief with his tongue. However, if someone has been saved from them and has freedom to believe and act, but then casts himself into the peril of misguidance, causing himself to be trapped in a pagan society, unable to utter the word of truth, in a place where he cannot carry out his religious or human obligations, he would deprive himself of happiness and would never succeed, as God says: *Surely (as for) those whom the angels cause to die while they are unjust to their souls, they shall say: In what state were you? They shall say: We were weak in the earth. They shall say: Was not God's earth spacious, so that you should have migrated therein? So these it is whose abode is hell, and it is an evil resort* (4:97).

Thus, the reason for making the clause, *and then you will never succeed*, as a consequence to, *or force you back to their religion*, becomes apparent.

Poser: Since being compelled to practice dissimulation (that is, pretending not to believe) while secretly believing can always be forgiven, how can the clause "never succeed" be deemed consequential to "returning to their religion," even though it appears from their situation that they would be forced to do so?

Reply: This has been disproved (based on our explanation) and, besides, if they exposed themselves or showed the people their situation in any way and were subsequently returned to their religion (or ways) even by force, they would willingly be the cause of that and thus they would not be excused at all.

A number of other unconvincing attempts have been made to respond to the above question as follows (in our comments).

(1) Being forced to disbelieve may be a means for Satan to entice people into thinking it is good and to continue doing so.

Comment: The problem with this response is that one would have to say: "And it is feared that you will never succeed," instead of opining categorically that they will never succeed.

(2) What could be meant by "*forcing you back to their religion*" is an attempt to do so by conversion, rather than by coercion.

Comment: You know very well that the context of the story does not lend support to this response.

(3) It is possible that at that time, dissimulation (*taqiyya*) by pretending not to believe was absolutely impermissible.

Comment: The problem with this response is that there is no evidence for it.

The context of their reported conversation—that is, from, *how long have you tarried*, up to, *and you will never succeed*, is amazing. It indicates the perfection of their love for each other for the sake of God, their religious brotherhood, the equality that they treated each other with, the advice they gave each other, and their kindness toward each other. It was stated above that what one group responded, *Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried*, shows that they had a higher, more elevated level of *tawḥīd* than the other group (who said), *We have tarried for a day or part of a day*.

Next there is (the advice), *Now send one of you*, which is a suggestion to all of them (equally) to send a messenger. The speaker did not say high-handedly: "One of you should go" (*li-yadhhab aḥadukum*) or "One of you go." He did not say: "Go, so-and-so" or "Send so-and-so." He also said, *with this silver coin of yours*, attributing the coin to all of them. All this is evidence of their brotherhood and equality.

Then let him see which of them has the best food and *and let him behave with gentleness*, are pieces of advice. *For surely if they prevail against you*, is advice to them out of concern for their souls so they would be safe to continue practicing their religion.

Because of the *iḍāfa* (possessive) construction and demonstrative pronoun specifying that particular silver coin, the phrase, *this silver (coin) of yours* (bi wariqikum hādhihi), hints there is a special reason for mentioning the coin. Contextually, sending someone to buy food would not normally call for singling out the coin by mentioning it and qualifying it specifically with a demonstrative pronoun. Perhaps the coin was mentioned along with a specifying demonstrative pronoun because the coin was the reason their secret was discovered and their situation became known. When he (the man who went to the city) took the coin out to pay for the food, (it was clear that) the coin had been minted three centuries earlier. Apart from this phrase (*bi waraqikum hādhihi*), nothing else in the verses narrating their story gives us any clue why their secret was

discovered.

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَعۡثَرۡنَا عَلَيۡهِمۡ لِيَعۡلَمُوٓاْ أَنَّ وَعۡدَ ٱللَّهِ حَقّٞ وَأَنَّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ لَا رَيۡبَ فِيهَآ إِذۡ يَتَنَٰزَعُونَ بَيۡنَهُمۡ أَمۡرَهُمۡۖ فَقَالُواْ ٱبۡنُواْ عَلَيۡهِم بُنۡيَٰنٗاۖ رَّبُّهُمۡ أَعۡلَمُ بِهِمۡۚ قَالَ ٱلَّذِينَ غَلَبُواْ عَلَىٰٓ أَمۡرِهِمۡ لَنَتَّخِذَنَّ عَلَيۡهِم مَّسۡجِدٗا ٢١

(18:21) ***And thus did We make (people) learn of them so that they might know that God's promise is true, and so that as for the Hour (time of the Reckoning), there is no doubt about it. When they disputed among themselves about their affair and said: Erect an edifice over them, their Lord knows them best, those who prevailed in their affair said: We will certainly raise a masjid over them.***

al-Mufradāt fī Gharīb al-Qurʾān says:

> *(The words,) ʿAthara al-rajul* (meaning, the man stumbled); *yaʿthur ʿathran* or [*yaʿthur*] *ʿuthūran* (meaning, he stumbles a stumbling): (are used for) when he falls. It is used metaphorically for someone who stumbles on something without meaning to. God says: *Then if it becomes known* (ʿuthira) *that they both have been guilty of a sin . . .* (5:107). One says: *ʿuthirtu ʿala kādhā* (something became known to me). *And thus did We make (people) learn of them* (wa kadhālika aʿtharnā ʿalayhīm), means: "We caused (some people to) alight on them while not at all seeking them."

The comparison in the phrase, *And thus did We make (people) learn of them*, is like its parallel in, *And thus did We rouse them*. It means: "Just as we made them become forgotten for a time, and then roused them for such-and-such (reason), likewise We made (people) stumble across them." The object of *aʿtharnā* is "people," as implied by the context and as testified by the end of the verse *and (the clause), so that they might know that God's promise is true*. The third person plural pronoun refers to "people." Contextually, God's promise means the Day of Resurrection.

The clause, *As for the Hour, there is no doubt about it*, is introduced by a conjunction, explaining the previous one.

When they disputed (yatanāzaʿūn) *among themselves about their affair*, is an adverbial phrase describing either, *We made (people) learn*, or, *so that they might know*. *Tanāzuʿ* means disputing with each other. It is said that the root meaning of *tanāzuʿ* is "contending with one another." When used

in its root meaning, it is transitive; but when used to mean disputing with one another, it is made transitive with *fī*, as in (the verse): . . . *then if you quarrel about anything* (tanāzaʿtum fī shayʾ) . . . (4:59).

What is meant by "disputing among themselves" about their situation is the people disputing over whether they would be resurrected. The pronoun "their" in "their affair" conveys a sense of how much they cared about and were concerned about this matter. This is what can be deduced from the vocabulary used in the verse, using part of it to explain another.

Based on the above, what it [the verse] means is: "Just as We caused them to sleep then roused them for such-and-such reason, so likewise We shall make people witness them at a time when they are disputing among themselves over the matter of the resurrection, so that they might know that God's promise (about the resurrection) is true and that there is no doubt about the Hour."

Alternatively, it may mean: "We made them become known so that, in addition to disputing among themselves about the resurrection, people would realize that God's promise to resurrect (people) is true."

Their being awakened from sleep proves that the raising of the dead on the Day of Resurrection is a reality. The proof of this is that, for all that time, their souls were stripped from their bodies, they could not feel; their senses ceased to work their bodily functions—such as the growth of their hair and nails, the change in their appearance, and the graying (of hair)—were curtailed; their bodies and clothes neither decayed nor disintegrated; and, finally, they were exactly the same as they were when they entered the cave. This is exactly the way that souls are stripped from bodies upon death and will be returned to them as they were (on the Day of Resurrection). The Companions of the Cave being put to sleep and reawakened over three centuries later and the resurrection are both miraculous. It is only the difficulty people have believing in these two things that challenges them, not any real evidence against them.

This incident took place at a time when there was a dispute between two groups of people—the monotheists who believed that the soul leaves the body upon death only to be returned to it upon resurrection, and the polytheists[1] who believed that the soul becomes separate and permanently

1 This is what idolaters generally believe in—they do not think that a person comes to an end when he dies. The only difference is that they do not believe in resurrection, believing instead in reincarnation. (Ed.)

departs from the body upon death. However, they did not believe in resurrection and may have instead believed in reincarnation. Under these circumstances, the whole incident was a divine sign with the purpose of dispelling any doubt in people's hearts about resurrection by demonstrating it through a similar incident. Their difficulty in believing in it was eased when it actually happened.

This analytical belief grew and became stronger among the people when the Companions of the Cave died shortly after they were roused; they lived just hours (after being awakened), only allowing enough time for people to know about their situation, to gather around them, and to test and ascertain the veracity of their story.

Thus another explanation of God's words becomes clear: the first two pronouns ("they" and "themselves") in, *When they disputed among themselves about their affair*, refer to the people, the third person pronoun "their" refers to the Companions of the Cave; and "when" is an adverb of time (*ẓarf*), *that they might know*. The subsequent words, *Their Lord knows them best*, lend support to this interpretation.

There is an objection to this interpretation; first, it implies that the dispute took place after the men were made to stumble across the Companions of the Cave, which is not the case. Second, the dispute took place before they realized that God's promise is true and that there is no doubt about the hour and their dispute was settled by this realization; so how can the dispute have coincided with this realization?

The answer to this contention is that, according to this interpretation of the verse, the people disputed over the Companions of the Cave after stumbling across them, while at the same time realizing that God's promise is true and that there is no doubt about the hour. The dispute which did take place before the people stumbled across the Companions of the Cave and before they realized that God's promise was true and that there is no doubt about the hour was their dispute among themselves over resurrection. According to this interpretation, it is not the dispute to which, *When they disputed among themselves*, refers.

Those who said, *Erect an edifice over them—their Lord knows them best,* were polytheists as evidenced by the words that followed, *Those who prevailed in their affair said . . .* According to one opinion, it means erecting an edifice over them, building something over the top of them to keep them away from and hide them from the people, to stop anyone

from seeing them—as when one says *banā ʿalayhi jidāran* (lit. "he built a wall over him"); that is, when someone surrounds another person with a wall, putting him behind it.

This line, together with what precedes it, *And thus did We rouse them*, along with, *And thus did We make (people) learn of them*, alludes to the complete story, as if what is implied is: When their messenger came to the city, the circumstances and situation had changed, since three hundred years had passed after they had entered the cave. Polytheism was no longer prevalent, and the reins of the society had been given over to monotheism without him knowing it. It was not long before his secret was out. The news spread, and people gathered around him, before rushing up to and crowding the opening to the cave to inquire about their story. The divine proof was thus achieved, and then God took them to Himself. Therefore, after being awakened, they only remained alive for a few hours, during which time the people's doubt about the matter of resurrection was dispelled. At that point, the polytheists said, *Erect an edifice over them—their Lord knows them best*.

In the clause, *Their Lord knows them best*, there is an allusion to a disagreement breaking out among the people who gathered around them. So they are the words of someone in despair who had discovered them and uncovered the truth of their situation. It can also be inferred from this clause that the people were disputing with each other over something peculiar to them; some of them were seeing the light (or truth), and others were indecisive but not pleased with what their opponents believed, so they said, *Erect an edifice over them—their Lord knows them best*.

The phrase, *Their Lord knows them best*, has two possible meanings, in line with the two possible interpretations of, *When they disputed among themselves about their affair*, referred to above. This is because, in either case, to a certain extent, the phrase follows on logically from the dispute between the people, as the reader will have already realized. Thus, if the dispute referred to in, *When they disputed among themselves about their affair*, is about the resurrection—either accepting or rejecting it—and the pronoun in the clause "their affair" (*āmrihim*) refers to the people, this means that they disputed with each other over the issue of resurrection.

Thus God made the people learn of them so that they would realize that His promise is true and that there is no doubt about the Hour. However, the polytheists did not end up where the sign was clearly

pointing, so they said: "Erect an edifice over them and leave them as they are with the people disconnected from them. Nothing about their affair has become clear to us and we have not reached certainty about them. Their Lord knows them best." The monotheists said: "Their affair is clear and their sign is manifest. We will certainly raise a *masjid* (mosque) over them, in which God will be worshiped and they will be remembered as long as it remains."

On the other hand, if the dispute was over the Companions of the Cave and the pronoun in "their affair" refers to them, it means that God made the people stumble across them after they were roused from their sleep and later on made them die so that they—that is, the people—would realize that His promise is true and that there is no doubt about the Hour, and the purpose was achieved. They, that is the people, disputed among themselves about their, the Companions of the Cave's, situation. It is as if they were disputing among themselves about whether they were asleep or dead, and whether they should be buried and interred or left as they were in the wide space inside the cave. So the polytheists said: "Erect an edifice over them and leave them as they are. Their Lord knows them best. Are they asleep or dead?" The monotheists said: "We will certainly raise a mosque over them."

However, the context supports the first interpretation because the likely meaning of what the monotheists said, *We will certainly raise a mosque over them*, is their response to what the polytheists said, *Erect an edifice over them.* The two things said by the two groups only contradict each other on the basis of the first interpretation. The same applies to, *Their Lord knows them best*, especially since they said, "Their Lord" instead of "Our Lord"; all of that is more compatible with the first interpretation. *Those who prevailed in their affair said: We will certainly raise a mosque (*masjid*) over them:* The monotheists were the ones who said that they build a place of prostration (*masjid*) as opposed to a place of worship (*maʿbad*), and this is testimony to that because a *masjid,* according to Qur'anic convention, is the name of a place taken to remember God and to prostrate to Him. God says: . . . *and mosques* (masājid) *in which God's name is much remembered* . . . (22:40).

There is a pause but not a conjunction because this is like a response to an implied question—as if someone asked: "What did the non-polytheists say?" So the response came, *Those who prevailed in their affair*

said. . . "Their affair" in, *Those who prevailed in their affair*, means the affair referred to in, *When they disputed among themselves about their affair*, and the pronoun refers to the people. Thus, *Those who prevailed*, refers to the monotheists' prevailing by because of the sign which proved that the resurrection was true. If the pronoun referred to the youths, prevailing would be through stepping up to address their affair, and, *Those who prevailed*, would mean the monotheists. Alternatively, it is said that it was the king and his aides (who prevailed). A further opinion is their close relatives (prevailed), but this is the most absurd opinion.

If "their affair" means something else and the pronoun refers to the people, "prevailing" would then mean the king or those in positions of responsibility in society, making the monotheists or the king and his supporters the ones who prevailed. If the pronoun refers back to "those who," it would make those in charge the ones who prevailed. Their prevailing over their affairs would mean their prevailing over whatever affairs they wanted and empowered. Nevertheless, the first interpretation is the best.

This verse is one of the battlegrounds between the exegetes' various opinions. They have incredible differences of opinion over its vocabulary, the plural pronouns within it, and its phrases. If all the possible explanations for the meanings of the vocabulary, the nouns to which the pronouns refer, and the particulars of its phrases which they have brought to light were multiplied together, there would be thousands of possible permutations. We have only referred to as many as is appropriate to the context. Whoever wants more than that should refer to the detailed exegeses.

سَيَقُولُونَ ثَلَٰثَةٌ رَّابِعُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ وَيَقُولُونَ خَمْسَةٌ سَادِسُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ رَجْمًۢا
بِٱلْغَيْبِ ۖ وَيَقُولُونَ سَبْعَةٌ وَثَامِنُهُمْ كَلْبُهُمْ ۚ قُل رَّبِّىٓ أَعْلَمُ بِعِدَّتِهِم مَّا
يَعْلَمُهُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ ۬ فَلَا تُمَارِ فِيهِمْ إِلَّا مِرَآءً ظَٰهِرًا وَلَا تَسْتَفْتِ فِيهِم
مِّنْهُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿٢٢﴾

(18:22) (Some) *say:* (They were) *three, the fourth of them being their dog; and* (others) *say five, the sixth of them being their dog, making conjectures at what is unknown; and* (yet others) *say seven, and the eighth of them is their dog. Say: My Lord knows best their number, none knows them but a few; therefore, contend not about them but with an outward contention, and do not question

concerning any of them.

God cites the people's disagreement over the number of Companions of the Cave and the various opinions on the matter. According to God—and He speaks the truth—there are three incremental, ascending views. One is that there were three of them and their dog was the fourth; the second is that there were five of them and their dog was the sixth. God comments on these by saying they are, *making conjectures at what is unknown* (rajman bi-l-ghayb), meaning speaking without knowledge.

This comment, about making conjectures, applies to both opinions. If it were applied to the second alone, it would have been correct to put the second opinion first and put the first one along with the third about which God says nothing to indicate disapproval.

The third opinion is that there were seven of them, their dog making eight. God cites it without any comment to indicate that it is false. This creates the impression that it is the correct opinion. It was already stated above in the discussion on their conversation, *A speaker among them said: How long have you tarried? They said: We have tarried for a day or part of a day. (Others) said: Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried*, that the wording gives the impression, or, indeed, indicates that there were at least seven of them.

Part of the beauty of the verse lies in enumerating all the opinions, arranging the numbers from three to eight in sequential order—three, the fourth of them, five, the sixth of them, seven, and the eighth of them. The clause, *Making conjectures at what is unknown* (rajman bi-l-ghayb), is a specifying complement (*tamyīz*) describing the first two opinions as conjectures about the unknown. *Rajm* means stoning. It is as if what is meant by *al-ghayb* (the unseen) is *ghāʾib ʿan al-ʿilm* (absent from one's knowledge). The person who says it does not know whether it is true or false. It compares someone who says something (without knowledge) with someone who wants to throw stones—he throws the stone without knowing whether it will hit the target or not. Perhaps that is what some of the opinions meant—they were conjectures at what is unknown; that is, they were making conjectures because the matter eluded them, and they had no actual knowledge of it.

Alternatively, it is said that *rajman bi-l-ghayb* means believing in the unseen, but this meaning is unlikely.

God says, *three, the fourth of them being their dog*, and, *five, the sixth*

of them being their dog, without any conjunction. Then He says, *seven, and the eighth of them is their dog*, with a conjunction. *Al-Kashshāf* says that:

> "Three" (*thalātha*) is the predicate of an omitted subject, with the implied meaning that they are three (*hum thalātha*). The same applies to "five" (*khamsa*) and "seven" (*sabʿa*). *The fourth of them being their dog* (*rābiʿuhum kalbuhum*), is a phrase—consisting of a subject and a predicate—adjectival to "three." The same is true of (the phrase), *the sixth of them being their dog* (sādisuhum kalbuhum), and, *the eighth of them being their dog* (thāminuhum kalbuhum).

Some might wonder why there is (the conjunction) "and" (*wa*) in the third sentence but not in the first two sentences. The answer is that the conjunction "and" introduces a phrase describing something indefinite, just as it is sometimes placed in a phrase describing the condition or status of something definite, such as in *jāʾani rajulun wa maʿahu ākharun* (lit. "a man came to me and with him was another") or *marartu bi Zaydin wa bi yadihi sayfun* (lit. "I passed by Zaid *and* in his hand was a sword"). Another example is: *And never did We destroy a town except and it had a term made known* (15:4).

The point of this is to emphasize the connection of the phrase to what it describes, and to indicate that the description is firm and definite.

The (conjunction) "and" (*wa*) shows that those who said, *seven, and the eighth of them is their dog*, said this based on firm knowledge and with confidence; they were not conjecturing about the unknown like the others did. The proof of this is that God followed up the first two opinions with (the clause), *conjectures at what is unknown*, and followed up the third opinion with, *none knows them but a few*. Ibn ʿAbbās said: "When the 'and' (*wa*) appeared, the counting stopped." That is, there were no more numbers that caught their attention; it was incontrovertibly and definitely confirmed that they were seven and their dog was the eighth.

Majmaʿ al-bayān says at the end of the summary of Abū ʿAlī l-Fārisī's opinion:

> "As for whoever says that this (conjunction) 'and' is exclusive to the number eight, citing the verse: . . . *until they come to it and its doors shall be opened* . . . (39:73), as evidence because heaven has eight gates, the grammarians do not acknowledge this."

The words, *Say: My Lord best knows their number, none knows them*

but a few; therefore, contend not in the matter of them but with an outward contention, and do not question concerning them any of them, is a command to the Prophet to put a complete stop to their guessing by saying that God knows best. He alluded to this earlier, for it is similar to what the youths said when they were discussing the matter and tried to come to an agreement when, *a speaker among them said, How long have you tarried? They said, We have tarried for a day or part of a day. (Others) said, Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried*. Nevertheless, the above alludes to some of those whom the Prophet addressed by saying, *My Lord knows best their number.* For He said, *ma yaʿlamuhu* as opposed to *la yaʿlamuhu*. This indicates negation of the circumstantial phrase followed by an exception to it by saying, *except for a few* (illā qalīl), thus rendering a positive circumstantial meaning. What springs to mind is that they were some of the People of the Book.

In sum, this means that the three opinions were in circulation during the time of the Prophet. Thus, *sa-yaqulūna thalāthatun* (some will say three) is indicative of the future. Similarly, so are, *wa yaquluna khamsatun* (some say five), and, *wa yaquluna sabʿatun* (some say seven) since they are joined with "and" (*wa*) to the phrase containing a verb with the prefix for the future tense, which mean the near future in relation to the time when the verses were revealed or the time when the incident occurred, so take note of this.

***Therefore, contend not* (fa lā tumāri) *in their matter but with an outward contention* (illa mirāʾan ẓāhiran):** Al-Rāghib says that:

> "*Miryah* means hesitation about something, and that it has a narrower meaning than *shakk* (doubt, uncertainty). *Imtirāʾ* and *mumārāt* both mean contending over something about which there is uncertainty. The root meaning comes from *marītu al-nāqah* which one says when he rubs a camel's udder to milk it. Argument is called *mumārāt* because of a person arguing (*mumāri*) persistently in the discussion, draining his opponent of everything he has to say."

It is said that "*outward contention*" means keeping the discussion shallow, restricting it to the Qur'anic account and not calling anyone ignorant or arguing against what they are saying. Alternatively, it is said that an "outward contention" is one which undermines the validity of the opponent's proof. One says *al-mirāʾ al-ẓāhir* when his proof is destroyed. It is

also said that *ẓahara* means that something is remote, as the poet says:

Wa tilka shakāt ẓāhirun ʿanka ʿāruhā
This is a complaint, the disgrace of which is remote from you.

The verse (therefore) means: "Since your Lord knows best, and He has already informed you of their tidings, argue with them only about the youths on the basis of clear argument (*muḥajja ẓāhira*) without going deeply into the matter, or on the basis of the argument which eliminates their proof (*muḥajja dhāhiba li-ḥijjatihim*), and do not ask for a definitive statement on the youths from any of them. Your Lord suffices you."

وَلَا تَقُولَنَّ لِشَاْىْءٍ إِنِّى فَاعِلٌ ذَٰلِكَ غَدًا ﴿٢٣﴾ إِلَّآ أَن يَشَآءَ ٱللَّهُ ۚ وَٱذْكُر
رَّبَّكَ إِذَا نَسِيتَ وَقُلْ عَسَىٰٓ أَن يَهْدِيَنِ رَبِّى لِأَقْرَبَ مِنْ هَٰذَا رَشَدًا ﴿٢٤﴾

(18:23–24) ***And do not say of anything: Surely I will do it tomorrow, unless God*** **(so)** ***pleases; and remember your Lord when you forget and say: Maybe my Lord will guide me to a nearer course to the right than this.***

Regardless of whether this addresses the Prophet alone, or the Prophet and others, it refers to a person who believes he can attribute doing something to himself, either now or in the future.

With its divine teachings, the Qur'an takes the position that there is nothing in existence, be it essence or cause and effect, which does not belong to God alone. He can do to it what He wills and He decides about it what He wills, without anyone being able to reverse His decision. No one can own anything apart from what God allows him to own and (what God) gives him control over, making him only the owner of what He has allowed him to own and in control of only what He has put him in control of. There are numerous Qur'anic verses alluding to this truth, so there is no need to cite them all.

Nothing in the cosmos with any agency or affect—what we call agents, means, and active causes—is independent in its causation. Nor can it act or create an effect without Him. People can only do or effect what God wills them to do, in the sense that He gives them control, instead of taking control away from them and willing the opposite.

In other words, no natural cause is inherently a necessary cause in and of its own self. Instead, it is only a cause because He gives it the ability to engage in cause and effect, and because He does not will the opposite. One could say this is accomplished through Him facilitating the path toward the effect, or through His permission (*idhn*). Permission is granting ability and removing impediments. Many verses indicate that every action performed by every agent is contingent on His permission. As He says: *Whatever palm tree you cut down or leave standing upon its roots, it is by God's command. . .* (59:5), *No affliction comes about but by God's permission. . .* (64:11), *As for the good land, its vegetation springs forth (abundantly) by the permission of its Lord. . .* (7:58), *And a soul will not die but with the permission of God. . .* (3:145), *And it is not for a soul to believe except by God's permission. . .* (10:100), *And We did not send any messenger except that he should be obeyed by God's permission. . .* (4:64). Along with many other verses.

Those who comprehend the status of their Lord and submit to Him should not see themselves as independent causes of their own actions, independent of anyone else. Instead, they possess what they possess because God has granted them possession; they have control because God has granted them control. All strength belongs to God. If they resolve upon doing something, they should resolve upon trusting in God as in: *. . .So when you have decided, place your trust in God. . .* (3:159).

When they promise something or tell people about what they are going to do, they should qualify it with "by the permission of God" or "so long as He does not will something else."

If a mind is already exposed to this Qur'anic truism, then when His words, *And do not say of anything: Surely I will do it tomorrow, unless God pleases*, come knocking on [the mind's] door, this is the first meaning that will come to mind, particularly since these words come after an explanation of His oneness, divinity, and lordship; and since the previous verses say that everything on earth is only an embellishment and that it will be turned into bare ground without herbage.

Since humanity's deeds are part of everything on earth, it follows that humanity's deeds are also an embellishment. People's deeds are like an ornamental garment which envelops them, and by which they are tested—although people believe that they own their deeds.

This is because (the words), *And do not say of anything: Surely I will*

do it tomorrow, unless God pleases, stops people from attributing their actions to themselves, even though, doubtlessly, there is no harm in doing so because, frequently, God attributes actions to His Prophet and to other people. He may even command people to attribute actions to themselves, such as in: . . . *My work is for me and your work is for you* and. . . (10:41), . . . *We shall have our deeds and you shall have your deeds*. . . (42:15).

Thus, the Holy Qur'an does not reject the idea of attributing actions to the agent per se; rather, it only rejects the idea that an agent is independent in his action and free from His will and His permission. This is what makes the exception in the clause (*unless God pleases*) correct.

Thus, it is clear, that (grammatically) the phrase implies a *bā'* of concomitance (*bā' al-mulābasa*)[1]—an exception "emptied" of all circumstances and all times. Its implied meaning is: "*And do not say of anything* (that is, of anything upon which you have resolved), *surely I will do it tomorrow* in any time or circumstance unless you say *God willing*—that is, you say, surely I will do it tomorrow if God wills that I do it or unless God wills that I do not do it." In any event, it means, "if God allows it to be done."

This is the result of reflecting on the meaning of the verse and it is supported by the end of the verse. However, exegetes have other explanations for the verse as follows:

(1) It means the same thing as the previous explanation, except that there is an elliptic "saying" in the exceptive phrase. The implied meaning is: "Unless you say, God willing." The omission of "you say" shifts "God willing" to a future meaning, making this God's way of training and educating His servants to say these words after anything they tell others they are going to do, steering them away from being categorical, in order to prevent them from lying or breaking an oath if they fail to do so due to any impediment. This explanation is attributed to al-Akhfash.

Comment: The problem with this explanation is that it is an unnecessary contrivance; in addition, the substitution changes the meaning, as is obvious.

(2) The literal meaning is intended throughout, except that the verbal phrase is substitutable with a verbal noun (*al-maṣdar al-mu'awwal*

1 *Bā'* is a grammatical particle in Arabic. (Ed.)

ilayh), *an yashāʾ Allāh* (God pleases). It is intended as an object, rendering a meaning of, "And do not say of anything: 'Surely I will do it tomorrow,' unless God pleases and wants, because God only wants acts of obedience." Thus, it is as if what is being said is: "And do not say of anything: 'Surely I will do it tomorrow,' unless it is an act of obedience." The interdiction is to guide to the best course of action (*li-l-tanzīh*) and not to indicate impermissibility (*li-l-taḥrim*), such that an indication could be made that it is permissible to resolve to do permissible things and talk about it.

Comment: The problem with this explanation is that it is based on construing "will" (*mashīʾa*) as legislative will (*irāda tashrīʿiyya*). There is no evidence for this and He has never used *mashiʾa* in this sense. On the other hand, the contingency of actions on His creational will is confirmed and has been used in several places in the Qur'an; for instance, what Moses said to al-Khiḍr[1]: *He said: If God pleases* (in shāʾ Allāh), *you will find me patient* . . . (18:69); what Shuʿayb (Jethro) said to Moses: . . . *if God pleases* (in shāʾ Allāh), *you will find me one of the good ones* (28:27); what Ishmael (Ismāʿīl) said to his father: . . . *if God pleases* (in shāʾ Allāh), *you will find me one of the patient ones* (37:102); . . . *you shall most certainly enter the Sacred Mosque, if God pleases* (in shāʾ Allāh). . . (48:27) and many other verses.

Note: This explanation is based on the fundamentals of the Muʿtazilīs. According to the Muʿtazilīs, the only will God has with regard to His servants' actions is a legislative will, connected to acts of obedience. However, both reason and textual evidence reject this proposition.

(3) The exceptive sentence refers to doing but not saying, without any need to draw an inference that anything is implied. It means: "Do not say about anything: 'Verily I shall act independently in doing something, unless God wills something different by making an impediment appear.'" As the Muʿtazilīs say, a servant performs an act independently unless God makes an impediment appear that is stronger than he is. What this really means is: "Do not say about doing a thing what the Muʿtazilīs say."

Comment: The problem with this view is that according to the above (explanation), the exceptive sentence would be more applicable to doing than to saying; so, there is no reason to say that an exceptive sentence

1 Some scholars believe that al-Khiḍr is Elijah, while others say he is Andrea. (Ed.)

cannot refer to doing something. An exceptive sentence refers to doing in many places in the Qur'an without there being any problem in understanding. For instance, quoting Abraham: . . . *And I do not fear in any way those that you set up with Him, unless my Lord pleases* . . . (6:80), . . . *And it befits us not that we should go back to it, except if God our Lord pleases* . . . (7:89), . . . *They would not believe unless God pleases* . . . (6:111) and many other verses.

Thus, the verse should be construed in a manner which is compatible with it.

(4) The exceptive sentence refers to all times and the object of "pleases" (*yashāʾ*) is "saying." This means: "Do not say that unless God pleases (*yashāʾ*) that you should say it." "Pleases" means permits—that is, do not say it unless God allows you to do so.

Comment: The problem with this explanation is that it is contingent upon inferring something—that is, "telling" is implied. However, there is no evidence for this in the wording. Without this inference, it is an imposition of an unknown obligation.

(5) The exceptive sentence refers to "ever," as in (the verse): . . . *abiding in it as long as the heavens and the earth endure, except as your Lord please*. . . (11:108). It means: "Do not ever say that."

Comment: The problem with this explanation is that it contradicts many verses cited above which attribute both past and future acts to the Prophet and to everyone else and even command the Prophet to attribute his actions to himself; for instance: . . . *My work is for me and your work for you*. . . (10:41), . . . *Say: I will recite to you an account of him* (18:83) and . . . *And remember your Lord when you forget*. . . (18:24).

The connection and shared context between this verse and the previous verse indicates that "forgetting" means "forgetting to say, God willing." Thus, remembering one's Lord means remembering His status, calling attention to that which is the cause of the exception—that is, He looks after every soul through what it earns; He puts people in possession of their actions and makes them able to do them, making them in control of what He put them in control of and able to do what He made them able to do.

The verse means: "When you forget to say, 'God willing' then remember that you have forgotten to do so, and remember your Lord in such a manner that you keep in mind that you would have done it, had you remembered—surrendering authority and power to Him and qualifying

all actions with His permission and His will."

Because the instruction to remember (*dhikr*) God is unqualified, it is not restricted to any particular wording. What is called for is remembering Him in a specific capacity whether (a) with the clause "unless God pleases"—appending it to what one has said when one remembers it and has not finished speaking, or (b) repeating what one has said and acknowledging that it is only if God pleases, or (c) after either a short or long pause, referring back pronominally to what one has just said before acknowledging that it is only if God pleases. Some narrations say that when the verses were revealed, the Prophet said: "God willing" or he remembered Him by seeking forgiveness, or something similar.

It is now clear from the above that the following explanations offered by others are incorrect (because):

First, that the verse is independent of the preceding ones, and that forgetting means forgetting Him or any kind of forgetfulness, rendering a meaning of: Remember your Lord when you forget Him, then remember Him, or, Remember your Lord when you forget anything.

Second, based on the first explanation, what is meant by remembering Him is exclusively by saying "unless God pleases," even after a long pause, or exclusively seeking His forgiveness, or regretting one's negligence.

And say: Maybe my Lord will guide me to a nearer course to the right than this: Here, too, the principle of continuity and the shared context of a duty being imposed in the previous verses dictate that the relative pronoun "this" (*hādhā*) should refer to remembering after forgetting, rendering a meaning of: "Hope that your Lord will guide you to something nearer to the right than forgetting before remembering"—that is, always remembering without ever forgetting. Thus, it is like the verses calling him (the Prophet) to always remember, such as: *And remember your Lord within yourself humbly and fearing and in a voice not loud in the morning and in the evening, and be not of the heedless ones* (7:205).

Mentioning something every time one forgets and then remembers, and keeping at it time and again is one of the means by which one always remembers it.

It is astonishing that exegetes have taken (the pronoun) "this" (*hādhā*) in the verse to refer to the reports of the Companions of the Cave and have said that the verse means: "Say: Maybe my Lord will give me signs signaling my prophethood better at guiding people than the reports of the

Companions of the Cave." The problem with this explanation is obvious.

Even more astonishing than that is what others say—that (the pronoun) "this" (*hādhā*) refers to what one has forgotten and that the verse means: "If you forget something, pray to God to remind you of it, and ask your Lord if He does not remind you of what you have forgotten to guide you to something better and more useful than what you have forgotten."

Still more astonishing is what others say—that the clause, *and say: Maybe my Lord will guide me*, is introduced by a conjunction explanatory to, *and remember your Lord when you forget*, meaning: "When you forget, repent to your Lord by saying: *Maybe my Lord will guide me to a nearer course to the right than this*." The second and third explanations could be turned into a single explanation; they are both contingent upon "when you forget" meaning, forgetting anything, but the reader will already have realized the problem with that.

وَلَبِثُواْ فِي كَهۡفِهِمۡ ثَلَٰثَ مِاْئَةٖ سِنِينَ وَٱزۡدَادُواْ تِسۡعٗا ٢٥

(18:25) ***And they remained in their cave three hundred years and they added*** **(another)** ***nine.***

This clarifies how long they remained asleep in the cave. This stay is what is meant in the verses telling the story. The length of their stay was referred to vaguely in the initial verses, *Then We veiled their hearing for numbered years in the cave.*

This is supported by what follows it: *Say: God knows best how long they remained*, plus, *recite what has been revealed to you*, followed by, *and say: The truth is from your Lord*, coupled with the fact that He does not mention any other figure. Thus, saying, *God knows best how long they remained*, after stating the figure is like saying: "My Lord knows best their number" and it alludes to the correctness of the stated figure.

One should not pay attention to the view that the clause, *And they remained in their cave*, is a quote from the People of the Book, whereas, *God knows best how long they remained*, is a response to them. Similarly, one should not pay attention to the view that, *And they remained. . . and they add* (another) *nine*, is an allusion to the opinion of the People of the Book, the pronoun referring back to them, meaning that the People of the Book added nine years to the actual figure; and then, *Say: God knows best how long they remained*, is a response to that.

What is narrated from the People of the Book is that the Companions of the Cave remained two hundred years or less, not three hundred and nine, or even three hundred.

Sinīn (years) is not a specifying complement to the number. Otherwise, it [the verse] would have said, *thalatha miʾatin sana* (lit. three hundred "year" instead of three hundred "years").[1] Rather, it is in apposition to *thalāthamiʾatin* (three hundred), as they say. There is in the words a similarity to the indeterminate, *sinīna ʿadadan* (numbered years) at the beginning of the verses.

Perhaps the aim of substituting *sinīn* (years) for *sana* (year) is to show that they tarried for a long time (from our perspective). Thus saying "and (some) add (another) nine" implies a sense of juxtaposition as if to say, "and they remained in their cave for three hundred years that seemed so long that some added another nine." This does not contradict what was explained before with regard to *sinīna ʿadadan* (a limited or counted number of years) which was mentioned to show how few the years were because the aim behind each of the two sections is different. In the prior section, the aim was to deny that there was anything amazing about the divine sign in the cave when compared with the divine sign shown by making everything on earth an embellishment for it. Thus, it was more appropriate to show how meagre the time period was. However, in this section, the aim is to show that their sojourn in the cave was one of His signs and was a proof against those who denied the resurrection; thus, it is more appropriate to describe the time period as long. The time period can be described in either way (short or long) depending on which perspective it is seen from—it is a paltry thing from His perspective but a long time from our perspective.

Adding nine years to three hundred years—the length of their stay—gives the outcome that they remained in their cave for three hundred solar years because the difference between three hundred solar years and three hundred lunar years is approximately nine years. There should not be any doubt that the verse means lunar years by *sinīn* (years) because a *sana* (year) in Qur'anic convention is a lunar year made up of the months which begin with the new moon. They are what count in the Islamic shariah.

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1 A specifying complement (*mumayyiz*) to a number between 3 and 10 is plural but a specifying complement to a number over 10 is singular. Because the word *sinīna* (years) is in apposition, this rule does not apply and so it is plural. (Ed.)

Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr disapproves of this strongly because the two figures do not correspond exactly and (the author) challenges what is narrated on the authority of ʿAlī on the matter, even though the difference between three hundred solar years and three hundred and nine lunar years is less than three months. Approximation like this is common in speech.

قُلِ ٱللَّهُ أَعۡلَمُ بِمَا لَبِثُواْۖ لَهُۥ غَيۡبُ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِۖ أَبۡصِرۡ بِهِۦ وَأَسۡمِعۡۚ مَا لَهُم مِّن دُونِهِۦ مِن وَلِيّٖ وَلَا يُشۡرِكُ فِي حُكۡمِهِۦٓ أَحَدٗا ٢٦

(18:26) ***Say: God knows best how long they remained; to Him are* (known)** ***the unseen things of the heavens and of the earth; how clear His sight and how clear His hearing! There is none to be a guardian for them besides Him, and He does not make anyone His associate in His Judgment.***

This is a continuation of the story about the Companions of the Cave. It refers to the people's disagreement among themselves over the matter and to the fact that what God related of their story is the truth, about which there is no doubt.

Say: God knows best how long they remained, suggests that—according to the previous verse—the people were not certain how long they remained in the cave so the Prophet was instructed to argue the point on the basis of God's knowledge—that He knows them (and their situation) better than anyone else.

To Him (lahu) *belong the unseen things of the heavens and the earth*, explains that He knows best how long they remained. *Lahu* (to Him) indicates exclusive possession. It means that He alone owns everything in the unseen realm, in the heavens and on the earth, nothing eludes Him, even if it eludes the heavens and the earth, because He owns the unseen in the true meaning of the word "owns." He has perfect sight and perfect hearing so He knows best how long they remained—which is part of what is unseen.

Thus, *how clear His sight* (abṣar), and, *how clear His hearing* (asmiʿ), both of which are exclamations, mean how perfect His sight and hearing are! These complete the reasoning as if to say: "How can He not know best how long they remained, when He placed them among the unseen and He possesses the unseen, and He saw their situation and heard what

they said?"

Some say that *lahu* (to Him) indicates that God alone knows; that is, the unseen is His in terms of knowledge. This proves that He knows all other creations (that is, non-unseen creations) because if we acknowledge that He has knowledge of the unseen, we can be certain that He knows everything else.

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Comment: This is incorrect because the intention of (the words) "how clear His sight and how clear His hearing!" as explained above most likely refers to something novel, and does not emphasize something already said. Similarly, the literal meaning of *lahu* is complete possession, not just knowledge.

The phrase*, There is none to be a guardian for them besides Him, and He does not make anyone His associate in His judgment*, denies that anyone has guardianship over them other than God. This includes both independent and dependent guardianship; that is, guardianship independent of God, or by way of the guardianship being delegated by God to someone else.

Because a verb ("make") is used instead of an adjective, the second phrase (*He does not make . . .*) indicates, through its construction, that the first phrase also denies that anyone else has guardianship other than Him, whether independently or through delegation (that is, whether the guardian would manage their affairs other than God, or whether the guardian were put in charge).

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The second phrase denies that God made anyone an associate in ruling or judgment in such a manner that God would be their guardian and delegate matters and governance to them, the way that rulers appoint governors and commissioners in various areas to handle governance directly without the knowledge of the rulers.

The phrase can be taken to mean: "How can He not know best how long they remained if He alone is their guardian and He Himself passes judgment among and over them?" The pronoun (them) in *lahum* (for them) refers to the Companions of the Cave or to everything in the heavens and the earth, as understood from the previous phrase, which puts rational beings first before everything in the heavens and the earth. The three explanations are in order of their appropriateness, the first one being the best.

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Thus the verse incorporates two proofs that God knows best how long they remained. First, applicable both to them (the Companions of

the Cave) and to everything else, *to Him* (lahu) *belong the unseen things of the heavens and the earth; how clear His sight and how clear His hearing!* So He knows best everything, including how long the Companions of the Cave remained. Second, a proof exclusive to them—that is, *There is none to be a guardian for them*, because God is their guardian, directly responsible for the judgment passed over them, so how can He not know better than anyone else? The two sentences are separate and not joined with a conjunction because their aim is different.

Examining Narrations

(1) About the verse, *Or do you think that the Companions of the Cave. . .*, *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says (it means):
"We have brought you signs more amazing than it. They were youths who lived in the period between Jesus son of Maryam and Muḥammad. The Inscription was two copper plaques which were *marqūm*—that is, they were inscribed with the account of the youths and how they submitted to God, what King Decius wanted from them, and what happened to them and transpired with them."

(2) The same book (*Tafsīr al-Qummī*) says:
My father told me on the authority of Ibn Abī ʿUmayr on the authority of Abū Baṣīr on the authority of Abū ʿAbdillāh:
The reason *Surat al-Kahf* was revealed was because Quraysh sent three people to Najrān: al-Naḍr b. al-Ḥārith b. Kaldah, ʿUqbah b. Abī Muʿīt, and al-ʿĀs b. Wāʾil al-Sahmī to learn from the Jews what they should ask God's Messenger.
So they set off for Najrān (and went) to the Jewish rabbis, and they said: "Ask him three questions; if he answers you in accordance with what we say, he is telling the truth. Then ask him a single question to which, if he claims to know the answer, he is lying."
They asked: "What are these questions?"
They replied: "Ask him about the youths in the prior era who went away, stayed away, and fell asleep. How long did they remain asleep before waking up? How many of them were there? What was with them besides themselves? What was their story? Ask him about Moses when God commanded him to follow the scholar and learn from him. Who was he? How did he follow him? What

was his story with him? Ask him about the one who set out where the sun sets and rises until he reached Gog and Magog's barrier. Who was he? What was his story?"

They then told them the tidings of these three questions, saying: "If he answers as we have dictated, he is telling the truth, but if he tells you something different, do not believe him."

They asked: "What is the fourth question?"

They replied: "Ask him when the Hour will be. If he claims knowledge of it, he is lying because no one else but blessed and almighty God knows when the Hour will be."

Thereafter, they returned to Mecca and gathered before Abū Ṭālib, saying: "Abū Ṭālib, your nephew claims that tidings from heaven come to him. We will ask him questions; if he answers them, we will know that he is telling the truth, but if he does not answer us, we will know he is lying."

Thereafter, Abū Ṭālib replied: "Ask him whatever seems proper to you," and so they asked him the three questions.

God's Messenger replied: "I will answer you tomorrow without any exception."

Thereafter, revelation was withheld from him for forty days until the Prophet felt worried and his Companions who had believed in him had doubt. The Quraysh rejoiced, and mocked and annoyed them, and Abū Tālib was sorrowful.

Then, after forty days, *Surat al-Kahf* was revealed, and so God's Messenger said: "Gabriel, you took your time." He replied: "We can only reveal by God's permission."

Thereafter, God revealed: "Or do you think, O Muḥammad that out of all Our signs the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription were an amazing sign of Ours?" He then related their story, saying: "When the youths sought refuge in the cave, they said: Our Lord! grant us mercy from You, and provide for us a right course in our affair."

(3) The same book (*Tafsīr al-Qummī*) quotes Imam al-Ṣādiq as saying: The Companions of the Cave and the Inscription lived during the time of a tyrannical, violent king who enjoined his subjects to worship idols. He would kill whoever failed to do so. They were a group of believers who worshiped God, mighty and sublime

is He. The king put people in charge of the city gates to prevent anyone from leaving the city without prostrating to the idols. Thus, they set out on the pretext of hunting. They passed a shepherd on their way and invited him to their religion, but he did not respond. However, he had a dog with him; it did (respond), and went off with them.[1]

Thereafter, the Companions of the Cave set off from the city on the pretext of going hunting (but were actually) fleeing from that king's religion. Then, when evening fell, they entered that cave, their dog with them, and God cast that soporific over them, as God says: *Then We veiled their hearing for a limited number of years in the cave*. And then they slept until God made that king and the people of the city perish. That era passed and another era came, along with other people.

Then, when they woke up, they said to each other: "How long have we been asleep here?" They looked at the sun which had risen and said: "A day or part of a day." Then, they said to one of them: "Take this silver coin and enter the city secretly—without their recognizing you—and buy us food because if they know about us and recognize us, they will kill us or force us back into their religion."

That man went and saw the city was different from what he was used to and saw people different from before whom he did not know, who did not know his language, and whose language he did not know. They then asked him: "Who are you? Where have you come from?" He told them, and so the king of that city set off with his companions, accompanied by the man, before stopping at the opening of the cave.

They began looking in and some of them said: *There are three of them and the dog is their fourth*. Others said: *Five and the dog is their sixth*. Others said: *Seven and the dog is their eighth*. God enveloped them with awe, rendering them all, except their companion, unable to go in to them. When he went in to them, he found them fearful that it was Decius' cohorts they had heard.

1 The next paragraph begins with "He said," indicating that Imam al-Ṣādiq was still speaking; but this has been omitted here for the sake of clarity since the entire section is a quotation from Imam al-Ṣādiq. (Ed.)

> Their companion told them that they had been asleep for a long time and that they were a sign for the people. They then wept and asked God to put them back to sleep as they were in their resting places.
>
> The king then said: "We should build a place of prostration here for us to visit them because they were a group of believers." They were turned twice every year, sleeping on their right side for six months and their left side for the other six months, their dog with them throughout, stretching its paws out in the wide open space in the cave, as He said: "We relate to you their story with truth."

Author's comment: Of all the traditions narrating the story, this is one of the clearest worded and freest of falsification. However, in spite of that, it says that those who disagreed over how many of them there were—by saying three, five or seven—were the people of the city who gathered around the opening to the cave after the youths woke up; this contradicts the literal meaning of the verse. It also says that the Companions of the Cave did not die the second time. Instead it says that they went back to sleep, as did their dog, stretching out its paws in the wide open space within the cave; and, also, that they continued to be turned twice a year from right to left and vice versa, remaining as they were, even though there is no known cave like this on the face of the earth with people sleeping in it.

Besides, the end of this narration—which we have refrained from citing here, fearing that it is the words of al-Qummī or another narration—says that (the words), *And they remained in their cave three hundred years and (some) add (another) nine*, is what the People of the Book said and that, *Say: God knows best how long they remained*, was a response to them. The reader will already have realized from our explanation above that this is refuted by the context, and that it would not be an acceptably eloquent form of composition.

Both sects (Sunnī and Shīʿah) report many narrations explaining the story. However, the narrations are contradictory and there are discrepancies, such that two narrations with exactly the same content in all respects can scarcely be found.

Part of this discrepancy is what some of the narrations say about the four questions. Some say the four questions were about the Companions of the Cave, Moses and the scholar, Dhū l-Qarnayn, and when the Hour

will come.

Others say that the questions were about the Companions of the Cave, Dhū l-Qarnayn, and the soul (that is, only three questions are mentioned). They (that is, the Jewish rabbis) said that the sign of the Prophet's truthfulness would be his not answering the last question. So he (that is, the Prophet) answered about the Companions of the Cave and Dhū l-Qarnayn, but because the verse: . . . *Say: The soul is one of the commands of my Lord* . . . (17:85) was revealed, he did not answer the last question. The reader will already have realized from the explanation of the "verse of the soul" (*āyat al-rūḥ*, in Ar. vol. 13) that the wording (in verse 17:85) is formulated as an answer and not as a rebuke.

Another example is that some narrations say that there was just one group known both as the Companions of the Cave and of the Inscription, whereas others say that the Companions of the Inscription were not the same as the Companions of the Cave, and that God alluded to them together in His words, but only told the story of the Companions of the Cave and eschewed telling the story of the Companions of the Inscription. They tell a story about them—they were a group of three who went out foraging for their family but the heavens came down upon them, and so they sought refuge in a cave. A rock from the top of the mountain fell down and blocked off the exit.

They said to each other that each of them should make mention of some of his good deeds so that God might free them. Thereafter, one of them cited his work for God's sake and prayed to God seeking the intercession of his work, and the rock moved enough to let in some light. Then the second did the same and the rock moved enough for them to be able to see each other. Then the third did the same, and God freed them, and so they escaped.

Nuʿman b. Bashīr cites this[1] without stating the chain of narration and attributing it (*marfūʿan*) to the Prophet.

Anyone familiar with the style of the Qur'an (lit. the "wise remembrance") will refuse to contemplate the idea that it alludes to two different stories only to go into detail about one of them and completely forget the other one.

Another example is that some narrations say that the king from whom

1 In *al-Durr al-manthūr*.

the youths fled was the Roman Emperor Diocletian (285–305 CE); others say that he claimed to be a god; and others say that he was the Roman Emperor Decius (249–254 CE), even though there are decades between the two. The king enjoined idolatry and the killing of monotheists. Other narrations say that he was a Zoroastrian propagating the Zoroastrian religion, even though history does not record that Zoroastrianism spread into the Byzantine Empire. Other narrations say that it happened in the time before Jesus.

Another example is that some narrations say that al-Raqīm was the name of the city they left; others, that it was the name of the valley; others, that it was the name of the mountain the cave was in; others, that it was the name of the dog; others, that it was a stone plaque; others, a lead plaque; others a copper plaque; and others, a gold one on which their names, the names of their fathers, and their story were inscribed, and that it was placed above the entrance to the cave. Others say that it was placed inside it, others say that it was hung above the city gate, others say that it was in one of the king's vaults, and others say that there were two plaques.

Another example is that some narrations say that the youths were children of the king and children of noblemen; others, that they were the children of scholars; others, that there were seven of them, the seventh being a shepherd who, along with his dog, tagged along with them on the way.

Wahb b. Munabbih's narration[1] says that they were bathhouse attendants who worked in one of the city's bathhouses; this narration tells the story of the king enjoining idolatry. Some say that they were some of the king's ministers whose counsel he sought in his affairs.

Another example is that some narrations say that they showed their opposition, and the king realized it before they left. Others say that he only found out about it after they had left. Others say that they colluded in leaving and left. Others say that they left without knowing each other and without prearranging it, but subsequently got to know each other and reached an agreement in the desert. Others say that a shepherd tagged along with them, as their seventh, others say that he did not follow them but his dog did and traveled with them.

Another example is that some narrations say that when they fled and the king looked into their affair, the king could not find them or any trace

1 In *al-Durr al-manthūr* cited by Ibn al-Athīr in *al-Kāmil fī-l-tārīkh*.

of them. Others say that he searched for them, found them sleeping in the cave, and ordered that an edifice be built at the entrance to the cave, trapping them, so that they would die of starvation and dehydration as punishment for their disobedience. Thereafter, they remained like that until, when God wanted to awaken them, He sent a shepherd who knocked down the edifice to build a pen for his sheep. At that time, God roused them and what happened to them was as per the story told by God.

Another example is that some narrations say that when their affair became known, the king came with some people and went in to talk to them in the cave. While he was talking to them and they were talking to him, all of a sudden they bade him farewell, wished him peace, and passed away. Others say that they died or went back to sleep before the king went in to see them, the entrance to the cave was blocked off, and they disappeared from sight without their being able to find a way in to see them. Thereafter, they built a *masjid* (mosque) to pray in.

Another example is that some of the narrations say that their souls were taken. Others say that God made them sleep a second time, and they will remain asleep until the Day of Resurrection, and that He turns them twice a year—from right to left and vice versa.

Another example is that the narrations disagree over the length of their stay. Most say they remained three hundred and nine years as stated in the verse in the words of God. Others say—that is what the People of the Book said with, *God knows best how long they remained*, being a response to them. Some say that three hundred years was what He said, and it was the People of the Book who added another nine.

There are other discrepancies between the narrations. We have collected most of the Sunnī narrations from *al-Durr al-manthūr* and the Shia narrations from *Bihār al-anwār*, *al-Burhān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, and *Tafsīr nūr al-thaqalayn*. Anyone who wants to scrutinize (the narrations) further should refer to them.

What the narrations can be said to agree upon or reach a quasi-agreement upon is the fact that they were a group of monotheists who fled from a tyrannical king who forced people to attribute partners to God, so they sought refuge in the cave, slept, and so on, up to the end of the story told by God.

(4) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* relates on the authority of Sulaymān b. Jaʿfār al-Hamadānī:

Jaʿfār b. Muḥammad (Imam al-Ṣādiq) asked me: "Sulaymān, what is a youth (*fatā*)?"

I replied: "May I be sacrificed for you, youth is when we are young."

He told me: "Did you not know that the Companions of the Cave were all middle-aged, but God called them youths (*fitya*) because of their faith, Sulaymān? Whoever believes in and fears God is a youth."

(5) Something to the same effect is narrated in *al-Kāfī* on the authority of al-Qummī, attributed to Imam al-Ṣādiq but without a chain of narration:

It is narrated on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās that they actually were youths. *Al-Durr al-manthūr* says that Ibn Abī Ḥātim cites Abū Jaʿfar as saying: "The Companions of the Cave were money changers."

(6) Al-Qummī also narrates via his chain of narration back to Sudayr al-Ṣayrafī on the authority of Abū Jaʿfar (Imam al-Bāqir):

"The Companions of the Cave were money changers."

(7) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* says that Durust related that Abū ʿAbdillāh (Imam al-Ṣādiq), referring to the Companions of the Cave, said: "They were exchangers (*ṣayārifa*) of words, not dirhams. [money]"

(8) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* says that Abū Baṣīr related from Abū ʿAbdillāh (Imam al-Ṣādiq):

"The Companions of the Cave kept their faith secret, pretending to be unbelievers, so God gave them two rewards."

(9) Something to the same effect is related in *al-Kāfī* from Hishām b. Sālim from him (Imam al-Ṣādiq). Al-ʿAyyāshī narrates something to the same effect from al-Kāhilī and also two narrations from Durust, both from him (Imam al-Ṣādiq). One of these two narrations says:

"They would tie sashes around their waists, and attend the festivals."

Author's comment: It may be stated that the literal meaning of His words, *When they stood up and said: Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth; we will by no means call upon any god besides Him*, is that they did not believe in dissimulation (*taqiyya*), as some exegetes believe to be possible based on His words, *or force you back to their religion, and*

then you will never succeed, as stated above.

However, this is not the case, for the reader will already have realized that their departure from the city was a flight from the abode of polytheism, in which they were prevented from proclaiming the word of truth and practising monotheism. When six noble people who knew each other planned together to leave, and turned their backs on their people, property, and homeland, this could not be called anything else but opposing idolatry. They would have been in great danger if the people had prevailed against them and they would have come to one of two lots—being stoned to death or forced back into the people's religion.

Thus it is clear that when they originally stood up and said, *Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth; we will by no means call upon any god besides Him*, this was not an open form of opposition by them. Nor was it a public condemnation of the people's religion or an assault on their way, because the general situation did not allow them to do so. They were choosing the side of God, resolving to remain firm in monotheism. If it is conceded that, *when they stood up and said: Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth*, means that they went to the public and refused to hide their belief, that would have been during the last days of their time among the people. Before that, they would inevitably have been hiding their belief. Thus it is clear that nothing in the context of the two verses contradicts the idea that the youths hid their belief (that is, they engaged in *taqiyya*) throughout the time they were among the people and in the city.

(10) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* also relates from Abū Bakr al-Ḥaḍramī from Abū ʿAbdillāh (Imam al-Ṣādiq):

"The Companions of the Cave set off without knowing each other and without any prior agreement. When they reached the desert, they made covenants and pacts with each other. This one took a covenant from that one, and that one from this one. They then said: 'Proclaim what you believe in' and lo and behold, they believed in the same thing."

(11) The following narration on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās says the same thing:

Al-Durr al-manthūr, citing Ibn Shayba, Ibn al-Mundhir and Abū Ḥātim on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās:

"We fought the battle of al-Maḍīq alongside Muʿāwiya near Byzantium and passed by the cave where the Companions of

the Cave—whom God mentions in the Qur'an—are."
Muʿāwiya then said: "If only they were shown to us and we could see them."
Ibn ʿAbbās replied: "This is not for you. God forbade that to someone who was better than you, and He said: 'If you looked at them you would certainly turn back from them in flight, and you would certainly be filled with awe because of them.'"
However, Muʿāwiya said: "I will not give up until I know what they know," and so he dispatched men, telling them: "Go and enter the cave and see." They went off, but when they entered the cave, God sent a wind to push them out. News of that reached Ibn ʿAbbās, and so he started telling their story.
He (Ibn ʿAbbās) said: "They were in one of the tyrannical kings' kingdoms and the people began worshiping (different things) until they began worshiping idols. These youths were in the city. When they saw that, they left that city, so God brought them together without prior agreement. They started asking each other: 'Where do you want to go? Where are you going?' They began hiding things from each other because one did not know why the other had left, and the other did not know why the first one had left, until they promised they would not harm each other if they told each other. Lo and behold, they were all agreed on one thing—otherwise they would have kept secrets from each other—and united in saying the same thing: 'Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth. . . a profitable course. . .'"
He (Ibn ʿAbbās) said: "They stayed, and so people came looking for them, not knowing where they had gone. They raised the matter with the king, and he said: 'Those people will be of significance after today—people who left without anyone knowing where they have gone, without any betrayal, and without any information on them.' He then called for a lead plaque and wrote their names on it, then threw it in his vault. That is what, *or do you think that the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription*, means; the inscription was the plaque on which they were written about. So they set off before finally entering the cave, and then God veiled their hearing and they slept. If the sun shone on them, it would burn them, and if they were not turned, the ground would eat into

them. That is what, *And you might see the sun. . .*, means."
He (Ibn ʿAbbās) said: "That king then passed on, and another king came along. He worshiped God, forsaking those idols, and was fair with the people. Thus, God roused them for His purpose, one of them asking: 'How long have you tarried?' One of them replied: 'A day.' Another said: 'Two days.' Another said: 'More than that.' Their eldest said: 'Do not disagree among yourselves because no people have ever disagreed among themselves without being doomed. Rather, send one of yourselves with this silver coin of yours to the city.'"
"He saw clothes that he did not recognize and buildings he did not recognize. He then approached a baker and tossed him a silver coin. Their dirhams had the imprint of young camels and the baker did not recognize the silver coin. He asked: 'Where did you get this silver coin from? You've found a stash? Show it to me. Otherwise I'll report you to the amir.'"
"He (the messenger) asked: 'Are you threatening me with the amir?'"
"And so he came to amir who was in charge. He (the amir) asked: 'Who is your father'? He replied 'so-and-so,' but he did not know him. He asked: 'Who is the king?' He said 'so-and-so,' but he did not know him. The people gathered around him, and so he brought it up with their scholar. He asked him and he told him. Thereafter he said: 'Bring me the plaque.' It was brought to him. He named his companions—'so-and-so' and 'so-and-so'—and their names were inscribed on the plaque. He told the people: 'God has guided you to your brothers.'"
"They set off on mounts, finally reaching the cave. When they approached the cave, the youth said: 'Stay where you are until I go in to see my companions. Do not rush in and frighten them—they do not know that God has turned toward you and inspired your repentance (from polytheism).'"
"They asked: 'Will you come back out to us?'"
"He replied: 'Yes, God willing.' He then entered, and they did not know where he went. He disappeared from sight, and they tried to go after him but they could not get in to them. They then said: 'We will certainly raise a *masjid* over them.' Thereafter, they

> raised a *masjid* over them to invoke blessings upon them and seek forgiveness for them."

Author's comment: This narration is well known; it is cited by exegetes in their exegeses and has met with approval. However, it is still not free of problems; for instance, it suggests that they are still asleep without the possibility of their being seen on account of divine intervention. The cave which is in Maḍīq, the cave of Ephesus, well-known to this day, is not like this.

The verse which Ibn ʿAbbās relies on only reflects their state when they were still asleep before being awakened, not after they were awakened. Another narration is narrated on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās which contradicts this one—namely the one in *al-Durr al-manthūr*, ʿAbd al-Razzāq and Ibn Abī Ḥātim on the authority of ʿIkrima. It tells the story and concludes with:

> So the king rode off, the people riding with him, and they finally reached the cave. The youth then told them: "Let me go in to my companions." Thereafter, when they saw him and he saw them, their ears were smitten. When they had given him enough (time), the king and the people went in. There were bodies which had not decayed at all. The only thing was that they had no souls in them. The king then said: "This is a sign God has sent you." Thereafter, Ibn ʿAbbās fought alongside Habīb b. Musallama. They passed by the cave and, lo and behold, there were bones inside. A man said: "These are the bones of the Companions of the Cave." Ibn ʿAbbās replied: "Their bones decayed more than three hundred years ago."

This narration compounds the problem. "Their bones decayed" means that the story had to have happened toward the beginning of the Common Era, or before it. Thus it contradicts all the narrations except the ones which say that they were around before Christ.

Another problem is what he said: ". . . one of them asking: 'How long have you tarried?' One of them replied: 'A day.' Another said: 'Two days. . .'" The Qur'an says: *They said: We have tarried for a day or part of a day. (Others) said: Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried*. This is what is conceivable and what would be expected from people who had been asleep, woken up, and were discussing how long they had slept, if they were relying on circumstantial evidence. They would not think that

they had been asleep for two or more days, and no evidence would have suggested that. Moreover, their disagreement in determining how long they had slept was not a reprehensible disagreement—that is, it was not a disagreement over doing something, which would lead to their destruction and would thus be forbidden. It was just an inevitable difference of opinion.

Another example is what the end says—that he entered, and they did not know where he had gone. *ʿUmiya ʿalayhim* means, some say, that the entrance to the cave disappeared from sight because God hid it. That does not fit in with what the beginning of the narration says—that it was apparent and well known in those areas. So did God erase it for that king and his companions but then manifest it to the people?

(12) In his exegesis, al-ʿAyyāshī narrates on the authority of Aḥmad b. ʿAlī on the authority of Abū ʿAbdillāh (Imam al-Ṣādiq) something to the same effect as the beginning of the narration of Ibn ʿAbbās' statement that *al-Raqīm* was a lead plaque on which their names were inscribed. However, other narrations are related from Ibn ʿAbbās refuting that; for instance, in *al-Durr al-manthūr* from Saʿīd b. Mansūr, ʿAbd al-Razzāq, al-Fāryābī, Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, al-Zujjājī in *al-Amālī*, and Ibn Mardawayh on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās:

"I do not know what al-Raqīm is. I asked Kaʿb and he replied: 'The name of the township they left.'"

(13) The same *Tafsīr* relates from ʿAbd al-Razzāq on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās:

"I know the whole of the Qur'an except for four things: refuse (*ghislin*) (69:36), tenderness (*ḥanānan*) (19:13), tender-hearted (*awwāh*) (9:114, 11:75) and *raqīm* (18:9)."

(14) *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says in Abū Jārūd's narration on the authority of Abū Jaʿfār that His words, *for then indeed we should have said an extravagant thing*, mean:

"An outrage against God if we say that He has a partner."

(15) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* relates from Muḥammad b. Sinān from al-Baṭīkhī from Abū Jaʿfār (Imam al-Bāqir) concerning God's words, *if you looked at them you would certainly turn back from them in flight, and you would certainly be filled by them with terror*:

"That does not mean the Prophet but instead just the believers,

one to another. However, it is addressed to him, putting him in their place."

(16) *Tafsīr Rūḥ al-Maʿānī* says:

"Their names, according to what is authentically narrated on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, were Maximilianos, Iamblichos, Martelos, Thabyunus, Dardunus, Kafashititus, and Mantonwasis, who was the shepherd. The dog's name was Qiṭmīr."

The same *Tafsīr* says:

"It is narrated on the authority of ʿAlī that their names were Iamblichos, Maximilianos, and Messelinia who were the king's right-hand men; and Marnush, Dabarnush, and Shadhnush, who were his left-hand men. He would seek the counsel of these six. The seventh was the shepherd whose name is not mentioned in this narration. It does however state that the dog's name was Qiṭmīr."

He (the author of the *Tafsīr rūḥ al-maʿānī*) says:

"Authenticating the attribution of this narration to ʿAlī is a long story. ʿAllāma Suyūṭī states in the footnotes to al-Bayḍāwī that al-Ṭabarānī narrates it on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās in *al-Muʿjam al-awsaṭ* via an authentic chain of narration. That which is in *al-Durr al-manthūr* is al-Ṭabarānī's aforementioned narration from *al-Awsaṭ* via an authentic chain of narration back to Ibn ʿAbbās."

He (continues to) say:

"They have been called by different names in some narrations. Ibn Ḥajar the *ḥāfiẓ* states in *Sharḥ al-Bukhārī* that there is much disagreement about how to pronounce their names and there can be no certainty on how to spell them. *Al-Baḥr* says that the names of the Companions of the Cave are not Arab and cannot be spelled out with internal vowelling or dots, plus the chain of narration introducing them is weak."[1]

1 According to the summary of western scholars, there are four versions of the story of the Companions of the Cave. They are fundamentally the same but the details differ: (1) the Syriac narration—the oldest found is as stated by Jacob of Serugh (d. 521 CE); (2) the Greek narration attributable to the tenth century, taken from the Syriac on the authority of Symeon the Metaphrast; (3) the Latin narration on the authority of Gregory of Tours; and (4) the

Author's comment: The narration attributed to ʿAlī is the one narrated by al-Thaʿlabī in *al-ʿArāʾis* and al-Daylamī in his book, without the intervening chain of narration, but it contains shocking elements.

(17) *Al-Durr al-manthūr* says:

Ibn Mardawayh cites Ibn ʿAbbās as saying: God's Messenger said: "The Companions of the cave will be the Mahdī's helpers."

(18) *Al-Burhān* says on the authority of Ibn al-Fārisī:

"Al-Ṣādiq said: Twenty-seven footsoldiers from the people of Moses who guide and are fair through the truth, seven of the Companions of the Cave, Joshua b. Nūn, Abū Dujānah al-Anṣārī, Miqdād b. al-Aswad and Mālik al-Ashtar will emerge from the Kaʿba's courtyard for the Qāʾim (the Mahdī). They will be helpers and rulers for him."

(19) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* relates from ʿAbdullāh b. Maymūn from Abū ʿAbdullāh from his forefather ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib:

"When a person swears (*ḥalafa*) by God, he will be excused (*fa lahu thunyāha*) for forty days. That is because a group of Jews asked the Prophet about something and he said: 'Come to me tomorrow,' without telling them that he would tell them, 'God willing.' Thereafter Gabriel was withheld from him for forty days. He then came to him and said: *And do not say of anything: Surely I will do it tomorrow, unless God pleases and remember your Lord when you forget . . .*"

Islamic narration attributable to the Syriac. There are narrations in Coptic, Ethiopian, and Armenian texts, all ultimately attributable to the Syriac. The names of the Companions of the Cave in the Islamic narrations are taken from the narrations by others. Gregory states that some of these names were their names before they became Christian and were baptised. These are their names in Greek and Syriac: (1) Maximianus/Maximilianos; (2) Yamlika/Malchus/Iamblichos; (3) Martinos/Martelos; (4) Dionysius/Dionysios; (5) Ewan/Ioannes; (6) Kashfutit/Exakoustodianos; (7) Antunis (Aftunis)/Andonios/Antonios; and (8) Qitmir/Koimeterion. In Latin, their names were: (1) Maximianus; (2) Malchus; (3) Martianus; (4) Dionysius; (5) Johannes; (6) Constantinus; and (7) Serapius/Serapion. Gregory states that before they became Christian, their names were: (1) Achilles; (2) Diomedes; (3) Eugenis; (4) Stephanus; (5) Probatius; (6) Sabbatius; and (7) Kyriakos. Some think that the Arabic names are taken from the Coptic taken [in turn] from the Syriac. (Auth.)

Author's comment: *Thunyā* with a *damma* followed by a *sukūn maqṣūr* is a noun derived from *istithnāʾ* (exception). There are other narrations to this effect related from the two Ṣādiqs (Imam al-Bāqir and Imam al-Ṣādiq). The likely meaning of *ḥalafa* in some of them is speaking categorically and assuredly, as is implied by his relying on what the Prophet said as evidence. As for the discussion on qualifying an oath after it is made and breaking it or not, this is best left to jurisprudence (*fiqh*).

A Detailed Discussion of the Story of the Companions of the Cave

1. The Story of the Companions of the Cave in the Narrations

The full story appears in detail in a number of narrations from the Companions (*sahāba*), successors (*tābiʿīn*), and Imams of the Ahl al-Bayt, such as the narrations from al-Qummī, Ibn ʿAbbās, ʿIkrima, and Mujāhid. It is told in *al-Durr al-manthūr* and Ibn Isḥāq's narration in *al-ʿArāʾis* cited in *al-Burhān*, Wahb b. Munabbih's narration cited in *al-Durr al-manthūr*, in *al-Kāmil* without any attribution, and Nuʿmān b. Bashīr's narration on the Companions of the Inscription set out in *al-Durr al-manthūr*.

These narrations, some of which are cited in the discussion on the relevant narrations (above) and others which we alluded to differ so much in their wording that they barely agree with each other on any of the important aspects of the story. The discrepancy between them is even greater in the narrations on particular aspects of the story, such as those dealing with the time in which they rose up (against) the king, the king in whose reign they rose up, their lineage, their characteristics, their names, the reason they were called the Companions of the Inscription, and all the other details of the story. Arriving at anything that one can be sure of is even more difficult.

The main reasons for the discrepancy between these narrations apart from the fabrication and interpolation which has crept into narrations like them are [outlined below]:

1) The People of the Book devoted a lot of attention to this story, as can be inferred from the narrations about it; the Quraysh heard it from them and asked the Prophet about it. In fact, it can be understood from depictions cited by historians on the authority of the Christians and from paintings found in caves in various parts of the world—Asia, Europe, and Africa—that the story gained an element of international renown. It is

in the nature of such stories that they manifest to every people in a form compatible with their own opinions and beliefs, and accounts of it vary accordingly.

Moreover, the Muslims were excessively enthusiastic in hearing the story, recording it, and embellishing it. They took what others had, just as they took what they themselves had, especially given that a number of scholars from the People of the Book, such as Wahb b. Munabbih and Kaʿb al-Aḥbar, had become Muslims, and the Companions and successors acquired the tidings of previous generations from them in large quantity. Thereafter the later Muslims learned these legends from the early Muslims and treated their narrations like the ones left as a legacy by the Prophet so it was a disaster.

2) It is God's custom in narrating stories only to select the important points which will be effective in achieving the (divine) purpose without going into detail, mentioning everything, or addressing all of the facets, lives, and times contemporary to the stories. God's book is not a history book. It is naught but a book of guidance.

This is one of the most obvious things which will be stumbled across by anyone reflecting on the aforementioned stories in His word, including the story of the Companions of the Cave and the Inscription. God first cites a line of their conversation alluding to the reason for their uprising for His sake; then how they remained firm upon the word of truth; then how they forsook the people after that; and then how they entered the cave and slept there, their dog with them throughout the long period. He then mentions how they were awakened from their sleep and a second conversation they had, leading to their situation becoming known to the people.

He then mentions how the people stumbled across them, how their souls were taken a second time after the divine purpose was achieved, and what was done after that—a mosque (*masjid*) was built over them. This is what His words encompass.

He avoids citing their names, lineages, dates of birth, their upbringings, the work they took on, their positions in society, when they rose up, the details of them forsaking their people, the name of the king whom they fled, the city they left, the people they used to live among, the name of the dog which kept close to them, whether it was a hunting dog or sheepdog and what its color was, even though the narrations assiduously mention these details as well as other matters which are not necessary to

know for the purpose of guidance, although they are the aim of historical investigation.

Then, when early Muslim exegetes began studying the verses telling the story, they wanted to explain how the verses were linked by adding the bits left out of the story to what had been selected and taken so that the whole story could be composed. Thus, the difference in their opinions led to discrepancies as in the narratives, and the matter led to what we see today.

2. The story of the Companions of the Cave in the Qur'an

God said, addressing the Prophet in the second person: *Therefore contend not in the matter of them but with an outward contention* (18-22).

The Companions of the Cave and the Inscription were youths who grew up in a polytheistic society that only believed in worshiping idols. Thereafter, monotheism spread into the society and a group of them believed in God. They were condemned for it and confronted with force, pressure, strife, and punishment. They were forced to worship the idols and reject monotheism. Whoever returned to their religion would be left alone, but whoever continued to resist would be killed in the worst possible way.

The youths were among those who had propagated belief in God, so God increased them in guidance, effused them with knowledge and wisdom, and revealed what was important to them through the light He had given them. He strengthened their hearts, and so they feared God alone and were not deterred by the incidents and dangers they were faced with. They realized that if they continued to remain in the ignorant despotic society, they would have no recourse but to follow their way of life, unable to utter the word of truth or follow the true shariah. They realized that what they had to do was to rise up on the basis of monotheism, reject polytheism, and forsake the people. They realized that if they forsook them and took refuge in the cave, God would save them from the trial they were enduring.

They then stood up and said to the people regarding their imperiousness and despotism: *Our Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth; we will by no means call upon any god besides Him, for then indeed we should have said an extravagant thing. These our people have taken gods besides Him; why do they not produce any clear authority in their support? Who is then more unjust than the one who forges a lie against God?* (18:14–15).

They then said: *And when you forsake them and what they worship save God, betake yourselves for refuge to the cave; your Lord will extend to you largely of His mercy and provide for you a profitable course in your affair* (18:16).

Thereafter, they entered the cave and settled down in a wide space within it, their dog stretching its paws out in the open space. They then petitioned their Lord with what they had previously recognized that He would do to them, saying: *Our Lord! Grant us mercy from You, and provide for us a right course in our affair* (18:10).

So God veiled their hearing for (numbered) years in the cave, and they remained in their cave—their dog with them—three hundred years and (some) add (another) nine. *And you might see the sun when it rose, it would decline from their cave toward the right hand, and when it set, it would leave them behind on the left while they were in a wide space thereof . . . And you might think them awake while they were asleep and God turned them about to the right and to the left, while their dog (lay) outstretching its paws in the wide open space; if you looked at them you would certainly turn back from them in flight, and you would certainly be filled with awe because of them.*

Next, God roused them after this long time—three hundred and nine years from the day they entered the cave, to show them how He had saved them from their people. Then they all woke up and found that the sun had changed position. They were lethargic from their heavy sleep: *A speaker among them said: How long have you tarried?* (18:19) They said: *We have tarried for a day or part of a day* (18:19), because of the change in the sun's position they saw, and so they wavered over whether a night had passed or not. Others among them said: *Your Lord knows best how long you have tarried* (18:19). One of them then said: *Now send one of you with this silver (coin) of yours to the city, then let him see which of them has the purest food, so let him bring you provision from it* (18:19), for you are hungry, and let the one among you who goes to the city *behave with gentleness* in his journey there and in buying the food, *and by no means make your case known to anyone: For surely if they prevail against you (that is, knew your position) they would stone you to death or force you back to their religion, and then you will never succeed* (18:19–20).

This was the time for God to have the people stumble across them because the people they had forsaken and left the day they entered the

cave had perished. God had made them, their kingdom, and their religion perish, and brought along other people, most of whom were authoritative monotheists. They—that is, the monotheists and the others, had a disagreement over the matter of resurrection, and God wanted to show them a sign with regard to that. He then made them stumble across the Companions of the Cave.

The youths' emissary set off and came to the city, thinking that it was in the same condition they had left it the previous day. However he found that the city had changed unlike anything ever seen in a day or a lifetime: the people were not the same, and the situation and circumstances were different from those seen the previous day. He remained confused about the matter until he wanted to buy some food with the silver coin he had with him—the currency of three centuries gone by—and so a dispute broke out over it. Without any ado, an amazing thing became apparent—that the youth was one of those who had lived there three centuries ago; he was one of the youths who had lived among the oppressive polytheists and who had subsequently fled their homes, forsaken their people to defend their faith, and entered the cave. God had then made them sleep for this long period before rousing them. Now, they were still in the cave, awaiting this one whom they had sent to the city to buy food for them to take their repast upon.

The news immediately spread in the city, and a large crowd of its inhabitants gathered around. They then set off to the cave along with the youth sent by his companions. What they saw confirmed what the youth had said about his companions and the divine sign with regard to the matter of the resurrection was manifested to them.

It was not long after the Companions of the Cave were awakened that caused them to pass away. At that point, the inhabitants of the city gathered at the entrance to the cave, once again disagreeing among themselves. The polytheists said: *Erect an edifice over them—their Lord knows them best* (18:21).

The monotheists [*those who prevailed in their affair*] said: *We will certainly raise a mosque over them* (18:21).

3. The story according to non-Muslims

According to most storytellers and historians, the incident took place during the period between the Prophet and Jesus. That is the reason it is

not mentioned in the Old or New Testament and why it did not originate with the Jews, even though a number of narrations say that the Quraysh heard the story from the Jews. It was only the Christians who cared about it and who told it, then and now. What is narrated from them is close to what Ibn Isḥāq cites in *al-ʿArāʾis* on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās except that their accounts differ from those of the Muslims on a number of issues:

1) The Syriac sources state that there were eight Companions of the Cave, whereas Muslim sources, and similarly Greek and western ones say that there were seven.

2) The story does not mention the dog belonging to the Companions of the Cave.

3) They state that the length of time the Companions of the Cave remained there was two hundred years or less, whereas most Muslims state that it was three hundred and nine years according to the literal meaning of the Noble Qur'an. The reason they say that is because they say the tyrant who forced people to worship idols and from whom the youths fled was Emperor Decius (449–451). According to what they say, the Companions of the Cave woke up in 435, 437, or 439 CE, so they could only have been in the cave for two hundred years or less. It is said that the first historian among them to mention the story was Jacob of Saruq, the Syriac who was born in the year 451 and died in the year 521. Others then took this from him. There is more to say and it will follow.

4. Where is the cave?

A number of caves and grottos have been excavated in various parts of the world with paintings on their walls of three, five, or seven men along with a dog. Some of them show that they are sacrificing something. A person looking at them will think of the story of the Companions of the Cave and might suppose that these engravings and images are an allusion to their story. After the story appeared in various regions, it spread and circulated and was used as a reminder for monks and hermits to worship in these caves.

People disagree over precisely which cave the youths sought refuge in and hid in. It is claimed to be in a number of different places, as follows.

The first cave is the one in Ephesus, which is a ruined archaeological city in Turkey 73 kilometers from the town of Izmir. The cave is one kilometer or less from Ephesus near the township of Selçuk at the foot of

Mount Pion (Panayır Dağı).

It is a wide cave containing—as it is said—hundreds of graves built from clay bricks and it is at the foot of the mountain. The entrance faces northeast, but there is no trace of any mosque, hermitage, or church. This cave is the most well-known according to the Christians and it is mentioned in several Muslim narrations. In spite of this cave's great popularity, the features mentioned in the Qur'an do not pertain to it.

First, God said: *And you might see the sun when it rose, it would decline from their cave toward the right hand, and when it set, it would leave them behind on the left* (18:17), which explicitly indicates that the sun's rays fall to the right of the cave at sunrise and to its left at sunset. This means that the cave's entrance must face south, whereas the entrance to the cave at Ephesus faces northeast.

The fact that the entrance to the cave at Ephesus faces north, along with what is said about where the sun's rays fall at sunrise and sunset, is what led exegetes to think that the right and left of the cave are from the perspective of someone entering as opposed to leaving the cave, even though the latter is what is customary, as previously mentioned in the exegesis of the relevant verse. al-Bayḍāwī says in his exegesis:

> "The entrance to the cave faces the stars on the handle of the Big Dipper, and the closest eastern and western horizons in line with it are east and west of the top of Cancer (the constellation in the zodiac). When the sun is on its axis, it shines slanted away from it facing the right side, which is to the west; and it sets in line with its left side, its rays falling to its side, breaking up its putridity and leveling its breeze without affecting them (the Companions of the Cave), harming their bodies, or spoiling their clothes."

Others say the same as he does. However, because its entrance faces northeast toward the Big Dipper and not the North Pole—as they say—the description does not apply, even from the perspective stipulated by them, because the sun's rays would fall on the western side adjacent to the entrance at sunrise. At sunset, the entrance and everything around it is shrouded in the shade, the sun's rays having disappeared far away along with the sun, and the shade having stretched out, unless of course it is claimed that (the words), *and when it set (it would) leave them behind on the left*, means the rays not falling, or falling behind them instead of to the left.

Second, His words, *while they were in a fajwa thereof*, mean an elevated part, but there is no elevated part in the cave of Ephesus—so they say—and in any event this is contingent upon *fajwa* meaning "an elevated part," which is not necessarily the case. It was stated above that it means a wide space.

Third, the literal meaning of: *Those who prevailed in their affair said: We will certainly raise a mosque over them* (18:21), is that they raised a mosque over the cave. However, there is no trace of any mosque, hermitage, or anything else like that at the cave at Ephesus. The closest thing to it is a church approximately three kilometers away, but there is nothing at all to link it to the cave.

Moreover there is no plaque, writing, or anything else to prove even partially that some of those graves—and there are hundreds of them—are the graves of the Companions of the Cave, or that they remained asleep there for the described period before being awakened before God caused them to pass away.

The second cave is Rajīb Cave, eight kilometers from the Jordanian capital Amman near a village called Rajīb. The cave is in a mountain carved into the rock in its southern foothill. Its edges from the east and west are open, and the sun's rays fall onto it from them. The entrance to the cave faces south. Inside the cave, there is a small ledge about three meters by two and a half meters that is to the side of the roof of the cave, [which is] three [meters] by three [meters]. There are several graves in the cave in the form of Byzantine sarcophagi—about seven or eight of them.

On the walls there are carvings and illegible effaced writing in ancient Greek. There is also a picture of a dog painted red, gold ornaments, and other embellishments.

Above the cave are the remains of a Byzantine hermitage proven by the coins and other remains discovered inside it to have been built during the time of Emperor Justinius I (418–427). Other remains—an Islamic mosque containing a prayer niche (*miḥrāb*), minaret, and facility to perform basic ablutions—prove that the hermitage was transformed again after the Muslims seized the land. In the open space opposite the entrance to the cave are the remains of another mosque built by the Muslims at the dawn of Islam. They then built it up and reinforced it repeatedly. It is built upon the ruins of a Byzantine church just like the mosque above the cave.

In spite of the importance attached to it and the attention paid to

this cave by people, as evidenced by the archaeological remains, it was abandoned, forgotten, and with the passage of time, ruined, buried, and destroyed until the Jordanian Department of Antiquities recently[1] took an

1 This excavation and discovery took place in 1342 AH/1963 CE. The man who carried it out, the eminent archeologist Rafiq Wafa al-Dijānī, wrote a book entitled *Iktishāf kahf ahl al-kahf* [The discovery of the Companions of the Cave's cave] published in 1964 CE. He describes in detail the department's efforts and what he suffered searching and excavating. He describes the particulars he came across in this cave and the remains discovered that support this cave being that of the Companions of the Cave mentioned in the Qur'an. He refers to the applicability of the signs stated about it and all the other indicators found there that this is the cave, as opposed to the one in Ephesus, Damascus, Petra or Scandinavia. He thinks it likely that the tyrant whose decree the Companions of the Cave were fleeing when they entered the cave was Emperor Trajan's (98–117 CE) and not Emperor Decius' (249–251 CE) referred to by the Christians and some Muslims or Emperor Decianus' (285–305 CE) referred to by some Muslims in their narrations. As evidence he relies on the fact that the emperor in whose reign God awakened the Companions of the Cave was Emperor Theodosius (408–450) as all Christian and Muslim historians agree. If we deduct the time period referred to in the Qur'an for [how long] the Companions of the Cave slept—309 years—from the middle of this pious emperor's reign—421 CE—the result is the year 112, contemporary to the emperor Trajan's reign. In that year the emperor Trajan issued a decree sentencing any Christian (*ʿIsawi*) who refused to worship the gods to be treated as an enemy of the state and put to death. Thus the objection raised by some Christian historians—such as Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*—that the time of 309 years referred to in the Qur'an for their tarrying is inconsistent with what history records, that is, that they were awakened during the reign of the pious Emperor Theodosius 408–451 CE, having entered the cave during the reign of Decius (249–251 CE)—can be refuted. The interval between the two reigns is two hundred years or less. This is good reasoning—may God reward his effort—except that a number of objections can be raised: (1) The 309 years referred to in the Qur'an which he deducted are apparently lunar years. He should have treated them as 300 solar years and deducted them from 430—the middle of the pious emperor's reign. (2) He stated that Muslim and Christian historians agree that the youths' affair became apparent during the reign of Theodosius. There is no consensus, with most narrations remaining silent on this pious emperor's name. Only a few of them mention him by name. They may have taken that from Christian historians. It may be conjecture on their part derived from what is attributed to Jacob of Serugh (452–521 CE) in a book he wrote in the year 474 CE. They then said that the emperor was Theodosius. However consensus like this

interest in digging and excavating. They uncovered it, so it came to light again after being hidden for centuries. Several pieces of weighty evidence and archaeological indicators favor its being the cave of the youths mentioned in the Qur'an.

Some of the Muslims' narrations say that the youths' cave is in Amman, as alluded to above. Al-Yāqūt refers to it in *Muʿjam al-buldān*, plus al-Raqīm is the name of a township near Amman where Yazid b. ʿAbd al-Malik had a palace along with another place in another township near it called al-Muwaqqar. A poet alludes to these two (palaces):

They visit Yazid atop his two equal sized (residences)
Under the shelter of al-Muwaqqar and al-Raqīm.

The city of Amman is also built on the site of Philadelphia, which was one of the most famous and most beautiful cities of its time before the beginning of the Islamic call. It, along with everything around it, was under the control of the Byzantines from the beginning of the second century CE until the Muslims conquered the Holy Land.

The truth is that the features of the youths' cave are more applicable to this cave than any other. The third cave is the cave on Mount Qāsiyūn near al-Ṣāliḥiyya in Damascus, attributed to the Companions of the Cave. The fourth cave is the cave in Petra in Palestine, which they attribute to the Companions of the Cave. The fifth cave is the cave discovered—so they say—on the Scandinavian Peninsula in northern Europe, in which they excavated seven undecayed corpses of Roman appearance, believed to be those of the youths; that is, the Companions of the Cave.

Other caves which are said to have been the site of the Companions of the Cave could be mentioned—for instance a cave near the town of Nakhchivan—a town in the Caucasus—believed by the locals to be their cave. People used to betake themselves to it and visit it.

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is their consensus based on their tyrants' being either Decius or Decianus. Either way the possibility that it was Trajan is eliminated. (3) He states that archaeological signs indicate that the hermitage on top of the cave was built during Justinius I's reign (518–527 CE). That would mean it had to have been built approximately a hundred years after the youths' affair became apparent. The apparent meaning of the Qur'an is that it was built at the same time as the people came across them. Thus one would have to think that its construction was a renovation of the original building when their affair became apparent. After all the above, the cave's particulars which appear in the Noble Qur'an are more clearly applicable to the Rajīb cave than anywhere else. (Auth.)

There is no evidence to support the premise that any of these caves are the cave mentioned in the Noble Qur'an. Furthermore, historical sources refute the latter two because the story is in any event Byzantine. Their power, even at its zenith, never reached these areas—northern Europe or the Caucasus.

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Verses 27–31

Introduction

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These verses refer back to and continue what came before the story of the Companions of the Cave—that is, how the Prophet was overwhelmed with grief and sorrow because of those people who did not believe in the Book that was revealed to him and rejected his call to the truth. This was followed by God consoling him that this abode is one of trial and tribulation; whatever is on it (the earth) is an embellishment for it, which God will turn into bare ground without herbage. The Prophet should not be distressed because they did not respond to his call or believe in the Book.

Instead, he should be patient along with the believers who are poor and who never cease to call upon their Lord. He should not pay attention to the idle, wealthy unbelievers who take pride in their worldly embellishments which will turn back into bare ground without herbage. He need do no more than invite them to their Lord. Whoever wants to believe, will believe; and whoever wants to reject him, will reject him—the Prophet has no responsibility over that. They do not believe to please the Prophet or disbelieve to upset him; rather [they act] because of the punishment or reward—the one they are facing—that God has prepared for them.

Commentary

وَٱتۡلُ مَآ أُوحِيَ إِلَيۡكَ مِن كِتَابِ رَبِّكَۖ لَا مُبَدِّلَ لِكَلِمَٰتِهِۦ وَلَن تَجِدَ مِن دُونِهِۦ مُلۡتَحَدٗا

(18:27) ***And recite what has been revealed to you of the Book of your Lord, there is none who can alter His words; and you shall not find any refuge besides Him.***

Majmaʿ al-bayān says that *laḥada ilayhi* and *iltaḥada* both mean "he inclined toward." Thus a *multaḥad* (lit. "a place of leaning"—meaning, a refuge) is a noun of place derived from *iltiḥād* meaning "inclining." The "Book of your Lord" (*kitāb rabbik*) refers to the Qur'an or the Guarded

Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūẓ*); the latter is more appropriate in the context of (the clause), *there is none who can alter His words. . .*

As mentioned above, this refers back to what came before the story, so it is most appropriate that the clause, *and recite*, should be understood to be connected to the clause, *surely We have made whatever is on the earth. . .*It means: "Do not kill yourself with grief over them and recite what has been revealed to you of the Book of your Lord because there is no one who can alter His words, for they are true and firm, and because you will not find any refuge to turn to besides Him."

Thus it is clear that both, *there is none who can alter His words*, and, *you shall not find any refuge besides Him*, act to provide an explanation, and are two proofs of the matter in the clause, *and recite.* This may be (the reason) God addressed the Prophet alone in the clause, *and you shall not find*, even though it is a rule which applies to everyone—that there will not be a refuge besides God for anyone.

It may mean that you will not find a refuge besides Him because you are a Messenger and there is no refuge for a Messenger except with the one who sent him [God]. Based on this explanation, it would be most appropriate for the clause, *there is none who can alter His words*, to be a single proof, meaning, and recite to them these verses containing the divine command to propagate because they are divine communications and His words do not change and you are a Messenger—therefore you have no recourse but to turn to your Sender and deliver His message. This explanation is supported by His words elsewhere: *Say: Surely no one can protect me against God, nor can I find besides Him any place of refuge: (It is) only a delivering (of communications) from God and His messages; and whoever disobeys God and His Messenger surely he shall have the fire of hell to abide therein for a long time* (72:22–23).

وَٱصۡبِرۡ نَفۡسَكَ مَعَ ٱلَّذِينَ يَدۡعُونَ رَبَّهُم بِٱلۡغَدَوٰةِ وَٱلۡعَشِيِّ يُرِيدُونَ وَجۡهَهُۥۖ وَلَا تَعۡدُ عَيۡنَاكَ عَنۡهُمۡ تُرِيدُ زِينَةَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَاۖ وَلَا تُطِعۡ مَنۡ أَغۡفَلۡنَا قَلۡبَهُۥ عَن ذِكۡرِنَا وَٱتَّبَعَ هَوَىٰهُ وَكَانَ أَمۡرُهُۥ فُرُطٗا ٢٨

(18:28) ***And keep yourself patient [by being] with those who call upon their Lord in the morning and the evening, seeking His countenance. And let not your eyes pass beyond them, desiring***

adornments of the worldly life, and do not obey one whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance and who follows his desire and whose affair is ever [in] neglect.

Al-Rāghib says:

> "*Ṣabr* means restraint in straitness. *Ṣabartu al-dābba* means I restrained the beast without fodder and *ṣabart fulānan* means I detained so-and-so in a prison with no possibility of escape for him. *Ṣabr* means restraining oneself from what both reason and religious law dictate one should restrain oneself from."

Something's *wajh* is what it turns toward you and faces you. The root meaning of *wajh* is the part of the body (that is, the face of a human being). His Face is His most beautiful names, His supreme attributes through which those turning toward Him turn, those calling to Him call, and those worshiping Him worship. He said: *And God's are the best names, therefore call on Him thereby* . . . (7:180).

As for His essence, there is no way to reach it. People only betake themselves to it and aspire it because He is God, Lord, high, mighty, has mercy and pleasure, as well as all the other names and attributes He has.

If God's goodwill, desired by someone praying to Him, means His attributes pertaining to His actions—such as His mercy, pleasure, His bestowal of favor and grace, he only wants it to be applied to him and to cover and clothe him in a way—making him the object of mercy, pleasing to Him and a recipient of His favor. If he means His attributes which do not pertain to His actions, such as His knowledge, power, magnificence, and might, he only intends to achieve nearness to Him through these supreme attributes. If you like, say that he wants to put himself where the divine attribute dictates he should be—that is, that he take a humble and wretched stance in the face of His power, magnificence, and might and takes the stance of an ignorant, powerless, weak one in the face of His knowledge, omnipotence, power, and so on. So take note of this.

Thus the problem with what some say becomes clear—that *wajh* means "pleasure" and "pleasing obedience" metaphorically because someone who is pleased with another gets nearer to him whereas someone who is angry with another turns away from him, or that *wajh* means the essence based on an omitted, implied *mudaf*, or, that *wajh* means *tawajjuh*, that is, they want to turn to Him (*al-tawajjuh ilayh*) and achieve nearness to Him.

Calling on their Lord morning and evening means calling continuously

and consistently all the time because continuity is achieved by repetition, morning after evening and evening after morning, by feel, so it is metonymy.

It is claimed that calling morning and evening means praying at the beginning and end of the day, or, alternatively, the obligatory daily prayers, but the problem with this interpretation is obvious.

And let not your eyes pass beyond them, desiring the adornments of the worldy life: Al-Rāghib explicitly states that the root meaning of *ʿadw* is passing. This is the meaning which runs into all its derivatives and places where it is used. *Al-Qāmūs* says:

> "One says *ʿadā l-amr* or *ʿadā ʿan al-amr*, meaning he passed from the thing and left it. Thus, *lā taʿdu ʿaynāka ʿanhum,* means: 'Do not let your eyes pass them and miss them while you desire the adornments of this world's life.'"

However, some say that the meaning of passing is only made transitive with *ʿan* to convey a sense of missing something. That is why al-Zamakhsharī says:

> *"lā taʿdu ʿaynāka* has *ʿadā* incorporating a meaning of missing something and going right over it, as when you say: 'His eye went right over him or his eye missed him, if it hurtles toward him but does not fix on him.' Otherwise, it would have been necessary to say: *wa lā taʿduhum ʿaynāk*."

And do not follow him whose heart We have made unmindful to Our remembrance . . .: Making his heart unmindful means imposing unmindfulness on it, making it forget the remembrance of God as a punishment, because they had stubbornly opposed the truth, so God made them go astray by making them unmindful to remembrance of Him. What He says about people in this situation is like what we will discuss under the verse: *Surely We have placed veils over their hearts lest they should understand it and a heaviness in their ears; and if you call them to the guidance, they will not ever follow the right course in that case.* (18:57)

This is not a justification for anyone who says that the verse is one of the proofs of His forcing people to be unbelievers and to disobey Him, because being forced as a punishment does not contradict freedom of choice—what does contradict it is being forced initially, but the verse is an instance of the former.

There is no need for contrived interpretation, such as saying that

"whose heart We have made unmindful" means "We exposed them to unmindfulness"; "We caught him out when he was unmindful"; "We linked him to unmindfulness"; or that *ighfāl* means making it *ghufl* (undesignated or unmarked), that is, "We made his heart unmarked by the characteristic of believers' hearts and did not mark it with the mark of believers by which the angels would have been able to recognize it."

The problem with all these interpretations will be obvious to the reader. *And he follows his desires and his case is one in which due bounds are exceeded: Majmaᶜ al-bayān* says:

> "*Furuṭ* means exceeding what is right and departing from it. It comes from what people say: *afraṭa ifraṭān* when someone is extravagant."

Following one's desire and being extravagant is one of the effects of unmindfulness of the heart. Hence joining the two phrases with a conjunction to "We made unmindful" is like joining an explanatory phrase introduced by a conjunction.

وَقُلِ ٱلۡحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكُمۡۖ فَمَن شَآءَ فَلۡيُؤۡمِن وَمَن شَآءَ فَلۡيَكۡفُرۡۚ إِنَّآ أَعۡتَدۡنَا
لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ نَارًا أَحَاطَ بِهِمۡ سُرَادِقُهَاۚ وَإِن يَسۡتَغِيثُواْ يُغَاثُواْ بِمَآءٖ كَٱلۡمُهۡلِ
يَشۡوِي ٱلۡوُجُوهَۚ بِئۡسَ ٱلشَّرَابُ وَسَآءَتۡ مُرۡتَفَقًا ٢٩

(18:29) ***And say: The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills—let him believe; and whoever wills—let him disbelieve. Indeed, We have prepared for the wrongdoers a fire whose walls will surround them. And if they call for relief, they will be relieved with water like murky oil, which scalds [their] faces. Wretched is the drink, and evil is the resting place.***

This is conjoined to what the verse, *And recite what has been revealed to you . . .*as well as, *And withhold yourself . . .*were conjoined to. Thus the context is one of multiple roles for the Prophet vis à vis their not believing in what had been revealed to him and their persistence at it. It means: "Do not feel sad about them but instead recite what has been revealed to you, withhold yourself with those poor believers and tell the unbelievers: 'The truth is from your Lord.' Do no more than that—so let him who please believe, and let him who please disbelieve. Their believing is of no benefit to Us, nor does their not believing do Us any harm. Punishment

and reward is up to them. They can choose what they like—We have prepared such-and-such for the iniquitous and such-and-such for believers who do good."

Thus it is clear that it is the Prophet who is being addressed (in the words), "so whoever wills—let him believe; and whoever wills—let him disbelieve". It is not part of the direct speech within the direct speech so no attention should be paid to what some say—that the phrase is the tail end of what he is being commanded to tell them.

It is also clear that the clause, *Indeed, We have prepared for the wrongdoers a fire*, gives the reason for their being given a choice between believing and not believing—supposedly it is a choice they are being given but in reality it is a threat. It means: "We forbade you from being overwhelmed with sorrow over them and commanded you to content yourself with propagating and persuading them just by saying: *The truth is from your Lord*. We have not sought to insist or pester because We have prepared consequences for their accepting or declining this invitation. What We have prepared suffices as an incentive or deterrent and there is no need for any more than that. It is up to them to choose for themselves which of the two positions they wish."

Indeed, We have prepared for the wrongdoers a fire whose walls will surround them; and if they call for relief, they will be relieved with water like murky oil, which scalds [their] faces; wretched is the drink, and evil is the resting place: *Majmaʿ al-bayān* says:

> "*Surādiq* means an encampment encircling what is inside it. Alternatively, it is said that *surādiq* is a cover wound round the encampment. *Muhl* is coagulated oil. Alternatively it is said to be molten brass. *Murtafaq* means somewhere to rest one's elbow (*mirfaq*). One says *irtafaqa* to mean he rested on his elbow."

One says of something that is well-cooked *shawā* or *yashwī* (meaning, he broiled it or he is broiling it) when it is well-done.

Substituting iniquity/wrongdoing (*ẓulm*) for disbelief (*kufr*) in (the sentence), *surely We have prepared for the iniquitous/wrongdoers* (li-l-ẓālimīn), as opposed to *li-l-kafirīn* (the disbelievers), indicates that the aforementioned consequence is for those who are genuinely iniquitous. They are defined in (the verse): *Who hinder (people) from God's way and seek to make it crooked, and they are disbelievers in the hereafter* (7:45). The rest is clear.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ إِنَّا لَا نُضِيعُ أَجْرَ مَنْ أَحْسَنَ عَمَلًا ﴿٣٠﴾

(18:30) ***Surely (as for) those who believe and do good, We do not waste the reward of him who does a good work***

This explains the reward for the believers for their having believed and done good. The only reason He says, *We do not waste*, and not "We have prepared such-and-such for them" is to show the special attention and thanks given to them.

The clause, *do not waste* (lā nudiʿ), is the predicate of "We" (*innā*). In fact, it is an instance of putting the cause in the place of the effect. The implied meaning is: "We will let those who believe and do good have the full share of their reward because they have done good, and We will not waste the reward of anyone who does a good work."

Since in this verse punishment is deemed to be a consequence of iniquity and reward is in contrast for believing and doing good, we can infer from that, that there is no reward for believing without doing good. On the contrary, the verse may even give the impression that [believing without doing good] counts as iniquity.

أُولَٰئِكَ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتُ عَدْنٍ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهِمُ الْأَنْهَارُ يُحَلَّوْنَ فِيهَا مِنْ أَسَاوِرَ مِن ذَهَبٍ وَيَلْبَسُونَ ثِيَابًا خُضْرًا مِّن سُندُسٍ وَإِسْتَبْرَقٍ مُّتَّكِئِينَ فِيهَا عَلَى الْأَرَائِكِ ۚ نِعْمَ الثَّوَابُ وَحَسُنَتْ مُرْتَفَقًا ﴿٣١﴾

(18:31) ***These it is for whom are gardens of perpetuity beneath which rivers flow, ornaments shall be given to them therein of bracelets of gold, and they shall wear green robes of fine silk and thick silk brocade interwoven with gold, reclining therein on raised couches; excellent the recompense and goodly the resting place.***

ʿAdn means perpetuity and so *jannātu ʿadnin* means gardens of perpetuity. It is said that *asāwir* is the plural of *aswira*, which in turn is the plural of *siwār* with a *kasra* under the *sīn* meaning bracelet. Al-Rāghib says that it is an Arabicized Persian word, the etymological source of which is *dastvāreh*. *Sundus* means fine silk whereas *istabraq* means thick silk. *Arāʾik* is the plural of *arīka*, which is a couch. The meaning of the verse is clear.

Examining Narrations

(1) In *al-Durr al-manthūr*, Ibn Mardawayh cites via Juwaybir from al-Ḍaḥḥāk from Ibn ʿAbbās about the verse, *And do not obey one whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance*:
It was revealed about Umayya b. Khalaf. That is because he sought to enjoin the Prophet to do something God hated—cast out the poor and favor the elite of Mecca. Thereafter, God revealed, *And do not obey one whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance*—meaning whose heart We have sealed from Our remembrance—that is, monotheism. "And he follows his low desires" means polytheism. "And his case is one in which due bounds are exceeded" means exceeding due bounds with regard to God's commandment and ignorance of God.

(2) Ibn Mardawayh, Abū Nuʿaym in *al-Ḥilya*, and al-Bayhaqī in *Shuʿab al-īmān* all cite Salmān as saying:
[With regard to] Those "*whose hearts were made to incline*"[1] ʿUyayna b. Badr and al-Aqraʿ b. Ḥābis—came to God's Messenger and said: "O Messenger of God, if only you would sit at the head of that gathering and deny entry to that lot and their smelly outer garments," by whom they meant Salman, Abū Dharr, and the poor Muslims who wore woollen outer garments, "we would sit with you, talk to you, and learn from you." Thereafter, God revealed, *And recite what has been revealed to you of the Book of your Lord. . . surely We have prepared for the iniquitous a fire*, threatening them with Hellfire.

Author's comment: Al-Qummī narrates something similar in his exegesis. However, he only mentions ʿUyayna b. al-Ḥaṣīn b. al-Ḥudhayfah b. Badr al-Fazzāri. The narration means that the two verses would have to be Medinan. In the same vein there are other narrations containing a similar story but the context of the verses does not support them.

(3) It is narrated in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, regarding the words of God, *And keep yourself patient [by being] with those who call on their Lord morning and evening*, that Abū Jaʿfar and Abū ʿAbdillāh (Imam al-Bāqir and Imam al-Ṣādiq) said:

1 The phrase *al-Muʾallaf qulūbihim* refers to former enemies of Islam who were given money or gifts to soften their hearts. (Ed.)

He means by that the prayer.

(4) It is narrated on the authority of ʿĀṣim al-Kūzī from Abū ʿAbdillāh (Imam al-Ṣādiq):

I heard him say about God's words, "So let him who please believe, and let him who please disbelieve", that it is a threat (*Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*).

(5) *Al-Kafi*, *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*, and other sources relate from Abū Hamza from Abū Jaʿfar that the words of God, *And say: The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills—let him believe; and whoever wills—let him disbelieve*, is about allegiance (*wilāya*) toward ʿAlī.

Author's comment: This is applicability (*jary*).

(6) Aḥmad [b. Ḥanbal], ʿAbd b. Ḥamīd, al-Tirmidhī, Abū Yaʿlā b. Jarīr, Ibn Abī Ḥātim b. Ḥibbān, al-Ḥākim (who also declares this narration to be authentic), Ibn Mardawayh, and al-Bayhaqī in *Shuʿab al-īmān* relate that Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī said that the Prophet said regarding [the clause], *water like murky oil* (bi māʾin ka-l-muhl): "It is like the dregs of oil; when one draws near it, the skin from one's face falls into it (*al-Durr al-manthūr*)."

(7) *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says about [the clause], *water like murky oil* (bi māʾin ka-l-muhl) that he (one of the Imams) said: "*Muhl* is what remains in the dregs of oil."

(8) It is narrated in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* from ʿAbdullāh b. Sinān from Abū ʿAbdullāh:

"The son of Adam was created hollow. He has to have food and drink. He said, *And if they call for relief, they will be relieved with water like murky oil, which scalds [their] faces.*"

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Verses 32–46

Introduction

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These verses contain two parables explaining the reality of wealth and children that human beings have in the life of this world. They are embellishments and adornments of this deceptive worldly life which quickly vanishes and is no more; this is what human beings adorn themselves with. These adornments distract people from remembering their Lord and seduce people into thinking they will live forever and can depend on these adornments. They are deluded into thinking that they possess and control these adornments until tragedy befalls them, and God makes these ornaments disappear and come to an end, and nothing remains of them except the like of a dream or false hope.

The verses return the discussion to explaining the truth God alluded to in the [previous] verses: *Surely We have made whatever is on the earth. . . . surely We will make what is on it bare ground without herbage* (18:7–8).

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Commentary

وَٱضۡرِبۡ لَهُم مَّثَلٗا رَّجُلَيۡنِ جَعَلۡنَا لِأَحَدِهِمَا جَنَّتَيۡنِ مِنۡ أَعۡنَٰبٖ
وَحَفَفۡنَٰهُمَا بِنَخۡلٖ وَجَعَلۡنَا بَيۡنَهُمَا زَرۡعٗا ٣٢

(18:32) ***And set forth to them a parable of two men; for one of them We made two gardens of grape vines, and We surrounded them both with palms, and in the midst of them We made fields.***

This sets forth a parable to those infatuated with the embellishment of the worldly life, their backs turned from remembrance of God, to make it clear to them in that regard that they are only clinging to an illusion or a mirage which has no reality.

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Some exegetes have stated that the story is hypothetical and that it did not actually happen. Others say that it really happened and have told a number of different stories in relation to it. There is no justification for doing so apart from the fact that the context of the story—such gardens

being two, grape vines and palms being planted, and the land between them being cultivated supports the view that it is a true story.

Two gardens of grapes (aʿnab), refers to grape vines; trees are often referred to by the fruits they bear. The words, *Wa ḥafafnāhumā bi nakhl,* means, *and We surrounded them both with palms. And in the midst of them*, that is, in the middle, between the two gardens, *We made fields*. Thus the area of cultivation was connected and the land yielded produce or fruits.

كِلْتَا ٱلْجَنَّتَيْنِ ءَاتَتْ أُكُلَهَا وَلَمْ تَظْلِم مِّنْهُ شَيْـًٔا ۚ وَفَجَّرْنَا خِلَٰلَهُمَا نَهَرًا ﴿٣٣﴾

(18:33) *Both these gardens yielded their fruits* (atat ukulahā)*, and did not fall short thereof in anything, and We caused a river to gush forth in their midst,*

Ukul means "that which is eaten." *Atat ukulahā* means their trees—vines and palms—yielded their fruits.

And did not fall short thereof in anything (wa lam taẓlim minhu shayʾan)*: Ẓulm* means "failure" and "thereof" refers back to the yield; that is, none of the yield was lost. Instead, the gardens yielded everything they could.

And We caused a river to gush forth in their midst, means: "We cleft a river full of water to irrigate (the two gardens) between them, satisfying their need for water by the easiest means, without any problem."

وَكَانَ لَهُۥ ثَمَرٌ فَقَالَ لِصَٰحِبِهِۦ وَهُوَ يُحَاوِرُهُۥٓ أَنَا۠ أَكْثَرُ مِنكَ مَالًا وَأَعَزُّ نَفَرًا ﴿٣٤﴾

(18:34) *And he possessed much wealth* (thamar)*; so he said to his companion, while he disputed with him* (wa huwa yuḥāwiruhu)*, I have greater wealth than you, and am mightier in followers* (nafaran).

"He" refers to the man. *Thamar,* refers to various kinds of wealth according to *al-Siḥāḥ* and *al-Qāmūs*. Alternatively, it has been said that "he" refers back to the palms rendering a meaning of: "The palms bore much fruit." It has also been said that the man had a lot of property apart

from his garden.

The first explanation is the best, followed by the second. The gardens' yielding their fruits without failure (*ẓulm*) could mean that the gardens were mature enough to bear fruit, and it was the right season. The clause, *And he possessed much wealth* (wa kāna lahu thamar), could mean that there actually was fruit on the trees; for instance, during the summer. This is the explanation which is most straightforward.

So he said to his companion, while he disputed with him . . . and am mightier in followers: *Muḥāwara* means holding an oral dialogue, returning answer for answer. *Nafar* means a person's adherents who follow him in one manner or another. They are called *nafar* because they hasten with him (*yanfarūn maʿahu*). That is why some interpret it to mean servants or children, and others as a band or clan. The former conforms more to what his companion said to him, which will be discussed subsequently—*if you consider me to be inferior to you in wealth and children*, because he substitutes children for *nafar*. Together, it means: "He to whom We assigned two gardens said to his companion while disputing with him: I have greater wealth than you, and am mightier in *nafar*—that is, children and servants."

What he told his companion betrays his personal belief, which deviated from the truth—namely, that he thought he had free reign over the property and children God had given him, and no one could challenge his will regarding them. He thought that he owned them. This is true; however, he forgot that God was the one who had put him in possession of them. He forgot that he only owned and controlled what God had given him. He forgot that what God had given him were only worldly adornments which are a temptation and a trial, which God tests everyone with to separate the impure from the good. Instead, these adornments seduced him, until he thought that he was independent from his Lord and he himself controlled his possessions, and that all the effects transpired from their apparent causes (*al-asbāb al-ẓāhira*), which were assigned to them.[1]

So he forgot God and relied on the causes—and this is polytheism—then

1 That is to say, the man viewed the relationship of cause-and-effect in the universe which God established as something independent from God, rather than recognizing that God employs cause-and-effect to carry out His will, and is subtle in that He does not bring about an effect without giving it an apparent cause—for instance, farming to obtain food instead of directly receiving food from God. (Ed.)

turned to himself and thought that he could act without restriction upon and in control of the means. He thought that all he had was an honor for himself alone. Thus he became conceited and displayed arrogance toward his companion.

That is why the two descriptions differ—that is, He describes the man's property by saying, "for one of them We made two gardens" instead of, "one of them had two gardens." And, the man describes himself to his companion by saying, *I have greater wealth than you, and am mightier in followers*. He only saw himself and forgot that it was his Lord who had put him in charge of the property he possessed and had strengthened him with his followers. So what he said to his companion, *I have greater wealth than you, and mightier in followers*, mirrored what Qārūn told those who advised him not to exult but to do good with the property God had given him as in the verse: *He said: I have only been given this on account of the knowledge I have* . . . (28:78).

The clause, *I have greater wealth than you*, reveals a claim to being singled out for honor and personal entitlement, then attributing partners to God by not being duly attentive and relying on apparent causes, which he exhibited when he entered his garden, as God quotes him saying, *I do not think that this will ever perish and I do not think that the hour will come.*

وَدَخَلَ جَنَّتَهُۥ وَهُوَ ظَالِمٌ لِّنَفْسِهِۦ قَالَ مَآ أَظُنُّ أَن تَبِيدَ هَٰذِهِۦٓ أَبَدًا ﴿٣٥﴾

(18:35) ***And he entered his garden while he was unjust to himself. He said: I do not think that this will ever perish.***

The four pronouns ("he," "his," "he," and "himself") refer back to the man. Garden (*janna*) is not in the dual form here because it is referring to gardens in general. Alternatively it has been suggested that (it is in the singular) because it is impossible to enter both gardens at once; it is only possible to enter one after the other.

Al-Kashshāf says:

> "If you were to ask, why does garden (*janna*) appear in the singular after having appeared in the dual form? My reply is that it means he entered what was heaven for him (*jannatahu*). He will have no heaven apart from it; that is, he will have no share of the heaven promised to the believers. What he owned in the world will be his only heaven. It does not mean the two (earthly) gardens

or even one of them."

This is a nice explanation.

While he was unjust to himself, means that he was only unjust because he displayed arrogance toward his companion when he said, *I have greater wealth than you, and am mightier in followers*. It reveals his self-conceit and his association of partners with God by forgetting Him and relying on apparent causes. These are some of the worst perils.

***He said: I do not think that this will ever perish* (tabīd):** *Bayd* and *baydūda* mean perishing and ending. The demonstrative pronoun "this" (*hādhihi*) refers to the garden. This sentence is separated from the previous sentence because it answers an implied question. It is as if someone asked, after he entered his garden, "What did he do?" And so the reply was, *He said: I do not think that this will ever perish*.

I do not think that this will ever perish, is what he says about his garden enduring forever. "Not thinking" is a rhetorical expression (*kināya*) for something which seems so hypothetical or theoretical that the possibility would never cross someone's mind.

Also, *I do not think that this will ever perish*, means that he is completely certain that it would last forever; he cannot imagine that it would disappear or come to an end.

This is the human condition. The human soul does not cling to something ephemeral because it expects it to change or disappear. The human heart only clings to what seems eternal in it—in whatever form that appears—and that is what allures people; the heart does not incline toward a thing's mortal aspects. You see that if the world comes toward a person, that person begins to rely on it and enjoy its adornments and then becomes engrossed in it. That person's desires make him single-minded and his hopes high, as if he sees no end for himself. He cannot imagine that the blessing he has at his disposal would ever disappear or the means which helped him get it would ever be severed. You see that if the world moves away from him, despair and pessimism take hold of him, making him forget any hope of salvation. He becomes convinced that he will live forever, and that wretchedness and difficult circumstances will last forever.

The reason for this is that God made human nature (*fiṭra*) such that people are attached to these ephemeral adornments; he did this as a trial and a test. If people turn their backs on the remembrance of their Lord, they occupy themselves with the worldly adornments before them, and

the apparent causes surrounding them; and they cling to the present situation which they perceive. Through their attraction, these embellishments and adornments engross people in them, until people forget their transient nature and believe they will be immortal. Whenever their instinctive sense of reason tries to warn them that time will betray them, that these causes will desert them, that life's pleasure will also leave them, and their appointed lifetimes will reach their appointed ends, their pursuit of their desires and high hopes prevent them from listening or paying any attention to it.

This is the situation of worldly people (*ahl al-dunyā*) who carry on living a contradiction—acting on what they believe in, on their whims, and rejecting their power of reason. They rely on impulsive judgment which prevents them from paying any attention to the judgment of reason.

This is what is meant by believing that apparent causes are permanent and worldly embellishments are eternal. That is why—as God relates to us—the man says, *I do not think that this will ever perish*, as opposed to, "this will never perish."

For the same reason, the man says, *And I do not think the hour will come*, based on the aforementioned belief that it will all last forever, as per the clause, *I do not think this will ever perish*. It creates belief that any change in the current situation through the coming of the Hour is a long way off. Everything cited by God are arguments put forth by the polytheists to refute the resurrection based on the belief that it is unlikely, as for example in the verses: . . . *Who will give life to the bones when they are rotten*? (36:78) and *What! When we have become lost in the earth, shall we then certainly be in a new creation*? . . . (32:10).

وَمَآ أَظُنُّ ٱلسَّاعَةَ قَآئِمَةً وَلَئِن رُّدِدتُّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّى لَأَجِدَنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهَا مُنقَلَبًا ﴿٣٦﴾

(18:36) ***And I do not think the hour will come, and even if I am returned to my Lord I will most certainly find a returning place better than this.***

This is founded on the aforementioned pretentions—self-importance and feeling entitled to good things—which give rise to the false hope of acquiring all sorts of good things and happiness without doing any

actual work. He [the man] says, *and even if I am returned to my Lord I will most certainly find a returning place better than this* [on account of my own nobility], but he does not say, "my Lord will give me something", something better than this short-lived garden which will go back to Him.

A person who utters these words has deluded himself with regard to the nobility claimed by his soul to such an extent that he swears to his claim, as indicated by the *lam* used in oaths: *wa la in rudidtu* (and even if I am returned) as well as the *lam* and *nun* to indicate certainty: *la ajidanna* (I will most certainly find). He also says, *I am returned* (rudidtu), and not "my Lord returns me to it," and, *I will most certainly find* (la ajidanna), instead of "My Lord will give me."

The two verses are similar to: *And if We make him taste mercy from Us after distress that has touched him, he would most certainly say: This is of me, and I do not think the hour will come to pass, and if I am sent back to my Lord, I shall have with Him sure good. . . .* (41:50) and *His companion said to him while disputing with him: Do you disbelieve in He who created you from dust, then from a small seed, then He made you a perfect man*? (18:37)—the discussion of which will follow.

The four verses following this are a response by the man's companion to the statement, *I have greater wealth than you, and am mightier in followers*, and to what he said when he entered his garden, *I do not think that this will ever perish*. What the speaker was aiming at can be broken down into two points.

First, he is putting himself above God by claiming that he—and his wealth and his followers—are independent, and by thinking that his power and strength are exempt (from God's control).

Second, he is putting himself above his companion and belittling him because of his paucity of wealth and followers. His companion then responds to both claims with arguments which cut short the claims at their roots. *Do you disbelieve in Him. . . save in God*, is a response to the first claim, and, *If you consider me to be inferior. . . find it*, is a response to the second.

While disputing with him, is repeated in the next verse to indicate that he did not lose his calm or sense of inner peace due to his belief by listening to what the man said. Instead, he maintained his etiquette throughout their dispute. For instance, he spoke gently, not roughly; and he avoided saying things which might seem ill-willed or offensive. Hence, he did not

speak of catastrophe befalling his son, the way he did about the garden. Instead, he just implied that, when he said that the garden could turn into barren earth and the water could recede into the land.

قَالَ لَهُۥ صَاحِبُهُۥ وَهُوَ يُحَاوِرُهُۥٓ أَكَفَرْتَ بِٱلَّذِى خَلَقَكَ مِن تُرَابٍ ثُمَّ مِن نُّطْفَةٍ ثُمَّ سَوَّىٰكَ رَجُلًا ﴿٣٧﴾

(18:37) ***His companion said to him while disputing with him: Do you disbelieve in He who created you from dust, then from a small seed, then He made you a perfect man?***

This is a rhetorical question condemning the association of partners to God in claiming his own autonomy and that of causes and effects, as referred to above. One aspect of his association of partners with God was to consider the coming of the Hour to be far off, and to doubt it.

This being the case, what is mentioned in *al-Kashshāf* to the effect that the man is regarded as an unbeliever and in denial of God's blessings because of his doubt in the resurrection—just like someone who does not believe in the Messenger—is incorrect. How can it be, if in his retraction, he denies attributing associates to God? If it were as [the author of *al-Kashshāf*] says, [the man] would have referred to believing in the resurrection.

If you were to say that the verses explicitly state that the man was a polytheist and polytheists deny resurrection, then my reply would be that the man was not a polytheist in the sense of an idolater—he had acknowledged in his own words what the fundamentals of idolatry would not allow by referring to God as—*My Lord*, whereas idolaters do not believe Him to be man's Lord or a god to be worshiped. They believe that He is just one of many lords and one of many gods. He did not deny resurrection outright, as alluded to above; rather, he had doubt about it and believed it to be a long way off by refusing to think about it. If he denied it outright he would have said, "And if I were to be returned" (*wa law rudidtu*)—as opposed to [what he said], "If I am returned to my Lord" (*wa la in rudidtu ilā rabbī*).

The evil consequence which the verse refers is on account of his associating partners to God in the sense of forgetting his Lord, believing himself and apparent causes to be autonomous. That constitutes denying His Lordship and giving the reins of dominion and disposal to someone else.

This is the root of the rottenness out of which every rotten branch grows, irrespective of whether he confesses with his tongue to there only being God, denies it or believes in many gods. Al-Zamakhsharī says—admirably so—about the clause, *He said: I do not think that this will ever perish:* "You see that even if most rich Muslims do not actually say this out loud, the way they behave portrays this (same) belief."

The believer refuted his companion's claim by saying, *Do you disbelieve in Him who created you from dust, then from a small seed, then He made you a perfect man*? This draws his attention to his origin—dust, followed by small seed. For that is the basis of man. Anything beyond that, allowing a person to become a perfect man, with all his qualities and effects, is a gift from God alone. Neither his fundamental composition nor any other natural apparent causes are possessed of any of that. For like human beings all their existence and effects are gifts from God.

Everything the human being has as a perfect human being by way of humanity and every vestige of humanity—such as knowledge, life, ability, and power—with which he directs the creational causes to achieve his goals and desires—belongs to God alone. It is given to the human being and placed in his possession without ceasing to be God's property or being cut off from Him. Rather, the human being clothes himself with whatever of that and these traits only belong to him through His will. If He does not please, the human being cannot be in possession of any of that, so he cannot be independent of Him with regard to any part of himself, the effects and qualities of his self, or any of the causes in the universe.

He (the companion) says (in other words): "You are dust, then a small seed which has no humanity, manliness, or the effects of that. It is God who gave them to you by His will and put you in possession of them. He is the owner of what He put you in possession of, so how can you not believe in Him and conceal His being the Lord? How far removed you are from being independent!"

لَّٰكِنَّا۠ هُوَ ٱللَّهُ رَبِّي وَلَآ أُشْرِكُ بِرَبِّيٓ أَحَدًا ﴿٣٨﴾

(18:38) ***But as for me*** **(lākinna)**, ***He, God, is my Lord, and I do not associate anyone with my Lord.***

The majority pronounce this word as *lakinnā* (but as for me)—without an *alif* in the middle where the two words are joined, but with the *alif* at

the end retained.

The origin of it—as they say—is *lakin anā* (however, I). The *hamza* (first letter of *anā*) was omitted after its *fatḥa* got moved to the *nūn* and the two *nūn*s were merged together, so they are joined together with a doubled *nūn* with a *fatḥa*, without an *alif* in the middle but with an *alif* at the end, as in the first person singular pronoun (*anā*; I).

The word *rabbī* (my Lord) is repeated. The second time is an instance of spelling out something normally expressed with a pronoun—normally in the context one would say, *wa lā ushriku bihi aḥadan* ("and I do not associate anyone with Him"). That is to indicate the reason for the predicate by making it contingent upon the attribute, as if to say: "I do not associate anyone with Him because He is my Lord, and associating anyone with Him is not allowed because of His being the Lord."

This is a believer saying it, in the face of what an unbeliever has claimed for himself. The meaning is obvious.

وَلَوْلَآ إِذْ دَخَلْتَ جَنَّتَكَ قُلْتَ مَا شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ لَا قُوَّةَ إِلَّا بِٱللَّهِ ۚ إِن تَرَنِ أَنَا۠
أَقَلَّ مِنكَ مَالًا وَوَلَدًا ﴿٣٩﴾

(18:39) ***And why did you not say when you entered your garden: It is as God has pleased; there is no power save in God? If you consider me to be inferior to you in wealth and children,***

This concludes what the believer says to his unbelieving companion. He is inciting and reproaching him for saying when he entered his garden, *I do not think that this will ever perish,* when instead he should have said, "There is no power, save in God." He should have attributed the entire matter to God's will and said that all power is His, as he explained to him—that every blessing is by God's will and there is no power save in Him.

The meaning to be inferred from the clause, *it is as God has pleased*, is either "the matter is as God has pleased" or "whatever God pleases will be." Either way, it is a relative clause. Alternatively, it could possibly be a conditional clause, implying, "whatever God pleases, is." (*mā shāʾahu Allāh kān*). The first of these inferred meanings is the most appropriate for the context because the intention is to explain all things being attributable to God's will, contrary to anyone who claims to be autonomous and to have no need for Him.

There is no power save in God, means that all power subsists through Him. Saying that all power is His alone means that whatever power appears among His creations and subsists through them, the very same subsists through Him without whatever power He has given breaking away [from Him] and creation becoming independent through it. He said . . . *that the power is wholly God's* . . . (2:165).

The response to what the unbeliever had said to his companion and what he said when he entered his garden thereby ends.

فَعَسَىٰ رَبِّيٓ أَن يُؤۡتِيَنِ خَيۡرٗا مِّن جَنَّتِكَ وَيُرۡسِلَ عَلَيۡهَا حُسۡبَانٗا مِّنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَتُصۡبِحَ صَعِيدٗا زَلَقًا ﴿٤٠﴾ أَوۡ يُصۡبِحَ مَآؤُهَا غَوۡرٗا فَلَن تَسۡتَطِيعَ لَهُۥ طَلَبٗا ﴿٤١﴾

(18:40–41) ***then maybe my Lord will give me what is better than your garden, and send on it a thunderbolt from heaven so that it shall become even ground without plant, or its waters should sink down into the ground so that you are unable to find it.***

Majmaᶜ al-bayān says:

> "The root meaning of *ḥusbān* is arrows fired to rain down all at once. It is skilled [Persian] archery from horseback (*ramy al-asāwira*). The reason the arrows are called *ḥusbān* is because it causes a great reckoning (*ḥisāb*). *Zalaq* is smooth, even ground on which there is no herbage or anything else. The root meaning is that which the feet slip on because it does not offer a firm foothold."

It was stated above that *ṣaᶜīd* means the level surface of the earth on which there is no growth. The water becoming *ghawran* means becoming sunken, or sinking into the earth.

The two verses, as alluded to above, are a response by the believer to his unbelieving companion with respect to his considering himself superior because he has more wealth and followers. His response derives from his previous explanation. In summary, it says that because matters are as God pleases and by His power, and it was He who gave you more wealth and followers than me, it is up to Him and not up to you, such that you should brag and consider yourself to be superior to me. It is entirely possible that He could give me something better than your garden, destroy

your garden, and turn my circumstances around to be better than your current circumstances and your circumstances around to be worse than my current circumstances, making me richer than you were in relation to me and you poorer than I was in relation to you.

It is likely that *tarani* (lit. "you see me") in the clause, *tarani anā aqall* (if you consider me to be inferior) means "seeing" in the sense of believing, thus being an action of the heart; and *anā* (I) is a separating pronoun (*ḍamīr faṣl*) coming between its two objects which begin as subject and predicate. Alternatively it could mean literally "seeing," in which case *anā* would be a subject pronoun by which the partially omitted object of *tarani* is emphasized.

The verses therefore mean: "If you consider me to be inferior to you in wealth and children there is no harm, given that it is up to my Lord—maybe my Lord will give me what is better than your garden and cast upon it (your garden) cold, wind, poison, lightning, or something similar as His divine punishment. It would then turn into smooth, empty land without any trees or crops upon it. Alternatively, its water would sink and you would not be able to find it because of the depth to which it has sunk."

وَأُحِيطَ بِثَمَرِهِۦ فَأَصۡبَحَ يُقَلِّبُ كَفَّيۡهِ عَلَىٰ مَآ أَنفَقَ فِيهَا وَهِيَ خَاوِيَةٌ عَلَىٰ عُرُوشِهَا وَيَقُولُ يَٰلَيۡتَنِي لَمۡ أُشۡرِكۡ بِرَبِّيٓ أَحَدٗا ٤٢

(18:42) ***And his wealth was destroyed*** **(uḥīṭa);** ***so he began to wring his hands*** **(yuqallibu kaffayhi)** ***for what he had spent on it, while it lay, having fallen down upon its roofs, and he said: Ah me! would that I had not associated anyone with my Lord.***

Iḥāṭa bi- is a figure of speech (*kināya*) meaning destruction. It is derived from surrounding (*iḥāṭa*) and encircling the enemy from all sides so that the enemy is cut off from all helpers and assistants, which means doom. He said: . . .*And they become certain that they are surrounded* (uḥīṭa bihim) . . . (10:22).

Fa aṣbaḥa yuqallibu kaffayhi (lit. "and he began to turn over his hands") —is a figure of speech meaning regret; someone who regrets often wipes his palms together turning the top of each hand, in turn, toward the ground.

The clause, *while it lay, having fallen down* (khāwiyatun) *upon its roofs*

(ʿurūshihā), is said to be a figure of speech for complete destruction. This is because the ʿ*urush* (roofs) of ruined, collapsing houses normally fall to the ground first. Their walls then fall in on their fallen roofs. *Al-khawī* means "falling." It is said that the root meaning is being empty (*al-khuluw*).

And he said: Ah me! would that I had not associated anyone with my Lord: It means, "I wish that I had not clung to what I had clung to, not relied on and been so sure of these means which I thought acted autonomously, and instead had referred the whole matter back to my Lord. My effort is lost and my soul has perished."

In other words, his various kinds of wealth perished or the fruit of his garden was spoiled, and he began to regret spending money on the ruined garden. He said, *Ah me! Would that I had not associated anyone with my Lord*, and wished that he had not had faith in what he had believed in and was deceived by—himself and all the other causes which were of no use to him.

وَلَمۡ تَكُن لَّهُۥ فِئَةٞ يَنصُرُونَهُۥ مِن دُونِ ٱللَّهِ وَمَا كَانَ مُنتَصِرًا ﴿٤٣﴾

(18:43) ***And he had no host*** **(fiʾa)** ***to help him besides God nor could he defend himself*** **(wa mā kāna muntaṣiran).**

A *fiʾa* means a host. *Muntaṣir* means unassailable.

The first five verses (from, *His companion said to him*, up to, *nor could he defend himself*) are a practical demonstration of his error in depending on the world lasting forever and its embellishment remaining, as per, *I do not think that this will ever perish*, the error becoming clear when, *his wealth was destroyed*, and his garden, *lay having fallen down upon its roofs*. Similarly, the error in his trust in and reliance on causes—telling his companion, *I have greater wealth than you, and am mightier in followers*, is explained by, *and he had no host to help him besides God nor could he defend himself*.

هُنَالِكَ ٱلۡوَلَٰيَةُ لِلَّهِ ٱلۡحَقِّۚ هُوَ خَيۡرٞ ثَوَابٗا وَخَيۡرٌ عُقۡبٗا ﴿٤٤﴾

(18:44) ***Here is protection*** **(walāya)** ***only God's, the True One; He is best in (the giving) of reward and best in requiting.***

The majority recite *walāya* (with a *fatḥa* above the *wāw*). An alternative recitation is *wilāya*, but they both mean the same thing. Some claim

that *walāya* means assistance and *wilāya* means sovereignty, but this has not been established. *Al-ḥaqq* is in the genitive case because it follows a preposition. *Thawāb* means any kind of consequence but is predominantly used for a good and pleasant reward. *ʿUqb* (both *ʿuqb* and *ʿuqub*) means requital.

Exegetes say that *hunālika* ("here") refers to the clause, *his wealth was destroyed*, namely, at that very place and moment when destruction came, and only God could have aided him. *Walāya* means assistance; that is, God is man's helper when calamity surrounds him; when all means are cut off and there is no helper apart from Him.

In the abstract, this interpretation is correct. However, this does not fit the intent of the verses—to explain that everything belongs to God, and that He creates and directs everything. Anything else is just a mirage and a worldly embellishment to try and test people. If it were as they claim, instead of the clause, *God's, the True One*, it would be more appropriate to describe Him as powerful, mighty, omnipotent, overpowering or something similar instead of "the True One" which is the opposite of "the false one." Furthermore there would be no clear explanation or place for the clause, *He is best in (the giving of) reward and best in requiting.* The correct interpretation—though God knows best—is that *walāya* means directorial ownership (*mālikiyya al-tadbīr*). It is the meaning shared by all the derivatives of the word as discussed above in relation to the verse: *Only God is your walī, and His Messenger . . .* (5:55).

The meaning is thus: "When doom is all around, when causes fail to exert their effects, it becomes clear that to man—who used to consider himself autonomous and independent—God alone is in charge of man and everything else; He has directorial ownership because He is the True God. In reality He is in charge of directing, and bringing about all effect. Any other apparent cause claimed to be His associate in directing and bringing about effect is powerless in itself, possessed only of whatever effect God has permitted and granted for it. Man thinks he has autonomy but his autonomy is only nominal. It is vain in itself, true only through God, whereas God is True in His Essence, autonomous and self-sufficient in Himself."

Though He transcends comparison, compared to other causes that claim to be partners to Him in producing an effect, God is better at rewarding. He gives a true reward to whoever serves Him whereas they (that is, the causes) give a false, momentary reward—one which does not last—to whoever serves them and clings to them. Even so, it is still only with God's

permission and God gives better results because He is the everlasting truth which never ends, fades, or changes in terms of the glory and honor He has always had. They (, that is, the causes) are finite, changing matters which God has made as an embellishment for this world's life, for man to become infatuated with and his heart to cling to until the decree reaches its appointed end and God turns it into bare ground without herbage.

If man cannot dispense with relying on someone to whom management is attributed and from whom he expects his well-being, then his Lord is better than anyone else, for, *He is best in* (the giving of) *reward and best in requiting.*

Some say that *hunālika* ("here") refers to the Day of Resurrection and so what is meant by reward and punishment is on that day. As the reader will realize, the context does not support that interpretation.

وَٱضۡرِبۡ لَهُم مَّثَلَ ٱلۡحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنۡيَا كَمَآءٍ أَنزَلۡنَٰهُ مِنَ ٱلسَّمَآءِ فَٱخۡتَلَطَ بِهِۦ نَبَاتُ ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَأَصۡبَحَ هَشِيمًا تَذۡرُوهُ ٱلرِّيَٰحُۗ وَكَانَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيۡءٖ مُّقۡتَدِرًا ﴿٤٥﴾

(18:45) ***And set forth to them (the) parable of the life of this world: like water which We send down from the sky so the herbage of the earth becomes tangled on account of it, then it becomes dry broken into pieces which the winds scatter; and God is the holder of power over all things.***

This is the second parable set forth to represent life in this world along with the rapidly disappearing embellishment which goes with it.

Hashīm (broken into pieces) is a verb of the *faʿīl* form meaning the object of *hashm* (breaking into pieces). According to al-Rāghib it means breaking something soft like herbage. *Dharā*; *yadhrū; dharwan* means, it scattered; it scatters; a scattering. Alternatively it is said to mean "it brought and took something away." God says, *and so the herbage of the earth becomes tangled on account of it*, instead of "it becomes tangled with the herbage of the earth" to indicate its predominance over all the other parts in forming the herbage. Other sources of water, such as well water and river water were not referred to alongside rainwater because rainwater is the source of all of them. The word *aṣbaḥa* in *fa aṣbaḥa hashīman* (becomes tangled on account of it) is in the sense of *aṣbaḥa*

*fīhi (*it became)—so they say—and so the predicate is not exclusive to the morning (*ṣabāḥ*).

Put together, it means: "And set forth to those infatuated with the world's embellishment, their backs turned on remembering their Lord, the parable of the life of this world is like water which We sent down from the sky—that is, rain, the earth's herbage mixed with it. It shone with blooms and joy and appeared in the most beautiful adornment but then it became fragile, broken, and cut up, strewn by the winds bringing it and taking it away. God is the holder of power over all things."

ٱلْمَالُ وَٱلْبَنُونَ زِينَةُ ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا ۖ وَٱلْبَٰقِيَٰتُ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتُ خَيْرٌ عِندَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ أَمَلًا ﴿٤٦﴾

(18:46) ***Wealth and children are an adornment of the life of this world; and the ever abiding, the good works* (al-bāqiyāt al-ṣāliḥāt)** ***are better with your Lord in reward and better in expectation.***

The verse is like the result of the aforementioned parable—even though hearts cling to wealth and children and souls yearn for them, expecting to benefit from them, and hopes surround them, they soon slip away, unable to reward or profit one with regard to everything one wanted from them, to confirm everything one hoped for or wished for or even most of it. There is in the verse—as you can see—a return to what was said originally—that is, the two verses beginning with, *Surely We have made whatever is on the earth an embellishment for it . . .*

Al-bāqiyāt al-ṣāliḥāt means good works. Humanity's deeds are recorded with God as explicitly stated in the Qur'an, so they are ever-abiding. Thus if they are good, they are an ever-abiding good. With God, they are better in reward because God rewards a person who brings them with the best reward. They are better in expectation because God's mercy and honor facilitated for people, expected on account of them, is a better hope than the world's embellishments and trimmings which do not fulfil most of the promises they make to mankind. Hopes dependent on them are mostly false hopes and even those of them which are true are beguilement and delusion.

Many narrations from the Prophet by both Sunnī and Shīʿah, and from the Imams from the People of the Household by the Shia alone, say that *al-bāqiyāt al-ṣāliḥāt* means the four glorifications (*al-tasbīḥāt*

al-arbaʿ)—that is, *subḥān Allāh* (glory be to God), *al-ḥamdu li-llāh* (praise be to God), *lā ilāha illā Allāh* (there is no god but God), and *Allāhu akbar* (God is too great to be described). Others say that it means prayer, others say it means love for the People of the Household; but they are all along the lines of allegorical interpretation and the applicability of the Qur'an to different instances.

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Verses 47–59

Introduction

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These verses are connected to the preceding ones, following as they do after the explanation that an end will soon come to these apparent causes and the trimmings of the beguiling world—and it will become clear to humanity that they neither benefitted nor harmed them. All that is left for or against human beings is what they have done, and they will be punished or rewarded for it.

The verses first mention the coming of the Hour and the coming of human beings alone with nothing but their deeds. They then mention Iblīs, his refusal to prostrate to Adam, and his transgressing the commandment of his Lord; the people take Iblīs and his offspring for friends rather than God, despite the fact that they are their enemy. The verses then refer to the Day of Resurrection, the summoning of the people and their associates, and the cutting off of the link between them. Other verses following that make promises and threats, but they are all connected thematically to the preceding ones.

Commentary

وَيَوْمَ نُسَيِّرُ ٱلْجِبَالَ وَتَرَى ٱلْأَرْضَ بَارِزَةً وَحَشَرْنَٰهُمْ فَلَمْ نُغَادِرْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا ﴿٤٧﴾

(18:47) ***And the day on which We will cause the mountains to pass away and you will see the earth a leveled plain, and We will gather them and leave not any one of them behind.***

The adverbial phrase is connected to what is implied as: "And remember the day of which We cause. . ." The mountains are made to pass away, by leaving their resting places. God refers to this in different ways, such as: *. . . and the mountains shall become (as) heaps of sand let loose* (73:14). *And the mountains shall be as loosened wool* (101:5). *So that they shall be as scattered dust* (56:6). *And the mountains shall be moved off so that they*

shall remain a mere mirage (78:20).

What can be inferred from the context is that the earth's being seen (as a leveled plain) depends on the mountains' being made to pass away. Once the mountains and hills pass away, one will see the earth clearly; one end not being out of the other's sight on account of any impediment. No area of it will be covered from any other area. It is also possible that it may allude to what is meant in the clause, *And the earth shall beam with the light of its Lord* . . . (39:69).

And We will gather them and leave not any one of them behind, means, "We will not omit any of them." The gathering applies to everyone.

وَعُرِضُواْ عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ صَفًّا لَّقَدْ جِئْتُمُونَا كَمَا خَلَقْنَٰكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍۭ بَلْ زَعَمْتُمْ أَلَّن نَّجْعَلَ لَكُم مَّوْعِدًا ﴿٤٨﴾

(18:48) ***And they shall be brought*** **(ʿuriḍū)** ***before your Lord, standing in a row: now certainly you have come to Us as We created you at first. Nay, you thought that We had not appointed to you a time of the fulfillment of the promise.***

The context testifies to the fact that the plural pronoun ("they") in *ʿuriḍū* and similarly the two plural pronouns in the previous verse, refer to the polytheists—those who are sure of themselves and the apparent causes which their life is linked to. They cling to life's embellishments like someone clinging to something everlasting. That constitutes disconnecting themselves from their Lord, denying that they will return to Him and not caring whether what they do pleases or angers God.

This is the way they [the polytheists] are as long as the test lasts, the embellishment is offered and the apparent causes are around them and the matter has not yet come to its appointed end. Then, when it is time, the causes are cut off, hopes are lost and God turns everything on it into bare ground without herbage and they will be left with nothing but their Lord, themselves, and the book of their deeds recorded against them. They will be brought before their Lord—whom they did not believe to be their Lord, otherwise they would have worshiped Him—in a row without any space between them or superiority on the basis of lineage, wealth or worldly position, for decisive judgment. It will become clear to them at that point that God is the manifest truth and that what they called on instead

of Him, the life's embellishment they clung to, their autonomy and the causes prepared for them, were nothing but illusions—no substitute for God. They were wrong in clinging to them, turning their backs on the way of their Lord and not following what He wanted them to follow. Indeed, it was their idea because they mistakenly believed that there was no place where they would have to stand up and reckon with [their choices].

It will have become clear through this explanation that these four sentences: *And they shall be brought . . .*; *Now certainly you have come to Us . . .*; *Nay you thought . . .*; and, *And the book shall be placed . . .*, are fundamental points selected from the full account of what will happen that day between them and their Lord, from the time they are assembled to the time of their reckoning. I content myself with them for the sake of brevity in making the point.

And they shall be brought before your Lord, standing in a row, is an allusion first to the fact that they are given no recourse but to return to their Lord. Second, there is no honor for them at that meeting. It is the words, *before your Lord,* which gives that impression; if they had been honored, the wording would have been: "their Lord" as in the verses: *Their reward with their Lord is gardens of perpetuity beneath which rivers flow . . .* (98:8) and . . . *surely they shall meet their Lord . . .* (11:29).

Alternatively, the verse would have said: "They shall be brought before Me," following the paradigm of the previous verses. Third, the various forms of superiority and worldly marks of honor—lineage, wealth, and position in society—are gone. They are made to stand in a single row without distinguishing the high from the low, the rich from the poor, or the master from the slave. The only distinction on that day is based on deeds. At that point, it will become clear to them that they erred during their earthly life and lost their way, so they will be spoken to with words like, *Now certainly you have come to Us . . .*

Now certainly you have come to Us as We created you at first, is an expression of direct speech. It implies: "He will say to them. . ." or "We will say to them, 'Now certainly you have come to Us. . .'" This points out their mistake and error in the world because they clung to its embellishment and ornamentation, and that distracted them from traversing God's path and following His religion.

The clause, *Nay you thought that We had not appointed to you a time*, means the same as the verse: *What! Did you then think that We had created*

you in vain and that you shall not be returned to Us? (23:115).

Even though the sentence appears from the context to be a digression from the previous one, the implied meaning is: "The world's embellishment, your attachment to your self, and the apparent causes distracted you from worshiping Us and traveling Our path. In fact, you thought that We would not appoint a time for you to meet Us and be reckoned with. In other words, even though your being distracted by the world and being attached to its embellishment was a reason for your turning your backs on Us and making numerous errors, there was a reason prior to that which is the source of it—that is, you thought that We would not make and appoint for you a time." Forgetting the resurrection is the root (cause) of forgetting the path (of God) and evildoing. He says: *those who go astray from the path of God, they shall surely have a severe punishment because they forgot the day of reckoning* (38:26).

The reason for attributing a mistaken belief to them—that there is no resurrection—is that their engrossment in the world and attachment to its embellishment and those they call upon instead of God is the action of those who think that they will live forever and that they will not return to God. Thus, it is the belief echoed by their condition and actions. Alternatively, it is possible that it is a figure of speech for their not caring about God's commandment and disdaining what He warned about, as in (the verse): . . . *but you thought that God did not know most of what you did* (41:22).

It is possible that the clause, *Nay, you thought that We had not appointed to you a time*, is a response to an implied excuse they made of not knowing or something similar, but God knows best.

وَوُضِعَ ٱلۡكِتَٰبُ فَتَرَى ٱلۡمُجۡرِمِينَ مُشۡفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَٰوَيۡلَتَنَا
مَالِ هَٰذَا ٱلۡكِتَٰبِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّآ أَحۡصَىٰهَاۚ وَوَجَدُواْ مَا
عَمِلُواْ حَاضِرٗاۗ وَلَا يَظۡلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدٗا ٤٩

(18:49) ***And the book shall be placed, then you will see the guilty fearing from what is in it, and they will say: Ah! woe to us! what a book is this! it does not omit a small one or a great one, but takes account of them (all); and what they had done they shall find present (there); and your Lord does not deal unjustly with anyone.***

*Waḍ*ᶜ *al-kitāb* means placing it in front of Him—for Him to judge on the basis of it. *Mushfiqīn* is derived from the word *shafaqa*, the root meaning of which is "gentleness." Al-Rāghib says in *Mufradāt al-Qurʾān*:

> *Ishfāq* means concern mixed with fear because the *mushfiq* loves the object of *ishfāq* (*mushfaq ʿalayh*) and fears what will befall him. God says: . . . *and they are fearful* (mushfiqūn) *of the Hour* (21:49). If it is made transitive with the preposition *min* (from), the sense of concern is more pronounced. He says: *Saying: Surely we feared* (mushfiqīn) *before on account of our families;* (52:26) and . . . *are in fear from it* (*mushfiqūna minhā*) . . . (42:18).

Wayl means perishing. It is called out in times of affliction—as is said—and is a figure of speech meaning that an affliction is worse than death, so a person pleads for the succor of death to escape from the affliction, just as one may wish for death when visited with a catastrophe. God says (quoting Maryam when she is undergoing the pain of childbirth): . . . *Oh would that I had died before this* . . . (19:23).

And the book shall be placed: The context suggests that it is a single book placed to reckon everyone's deeds. However, this does not contradict the idea of a separate book being placed for each person. Some Qur'anic verses say that each person has his own book, others that each nation (*umma*) has its own book, and a third group of verses say that there is one book for everyone. God says: *And We have made every man's actions cling to his neck, and We will bring forth to him on the resurrection day a book* (17:13), as discussed above; *This is Our book that speaks against you with justice* . . . (45:29).

The latter two verses will be discussed later on, God willing.

Alternatively, it is said that "the book" means the books of deeds and that the definite article is used to indicate the entirety of the genus. However, the context does not support this interpretation.

Then you will see the guilty fearing from what is in it: Making the phrase consequential to the placing of the book and mentioning their fear of what it says is proof that it is the book of deeds or a book containing their deeds. Describing them as guilty alludes to the reason for the predicate and to the fact that their fear of what it says is because of their guilt. Thus the predicate (*ḥukm*) applies to every guilty person even if he is not a polytheist.

And they will say: Ah! woe to us! what a book is this! it does not omit

a small* (saghīra) *one or a great* (kabīra) *one, but takes account of them (all): *Ṣaghīra* (small) and *kabīra* (big) are two adjectives which take the place of the nouns they describe—such as a sin, an act of disobedience, a trifling error or something similar.

These words of theirs, in the form of an exclamatory rhetorical question, are an expression of astonishment at and terror of the authority of the book in recounting all their sins or all incidents including sins. Thus, one understands the reason for putting small before great in, *a small one or a great one*, even though the obvious thing to do would be to say that it does not omit a great one or a small one, based on the fact that the phrase has a positive meaning and hierarchically it would be correct to progress down from a great one to a small one. The reason for not doing so is that the intended meaning is—though God knows best—it does not omit a small one in spite of its insignificance or triviality or a great one in spite of its enormity and obviousness. The context is one of terror disguised as astonishment; taking into account a small one in spite of its insignificance and triviality is more befitting to that than anything else.

It appears from the context that the phrase, *and what they had done they shall find present* (there), begins a new idea (*ta'sīs*) and is not an explanation for, *it does not omit a small one or a great one.* Thus, that which will be present with them is their actual deeds, in forms appropriate to them, and not the book of deeds, as is obvious. It is similar to: *O you who disbelieve! do not urge excuses today; you shall be rewarded only according to what you did* (66:7).

It is also supported by the clause, *and your Lord does not deal unjustly with anyone*. Based on the belief that all deeds will assume a corporeal form, the fact that there will be no injustice is easier to understand because what they will be rewarded or punished for will be their deeds. They will come back to them and catch up with them and no one can do anything about it. This is something the reader should understand.

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةِ ٱسْجُدُوا۟ لِـَٔادَمَ فَسَجَدُوٓا۟ إِلَّآ إِبْلِيسَ كَانَ مِنَ ٱلْجِنِّ
فَفَسَقَ عَنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّهِۦٓ ۗ أَفَتَتَّخِذُونَهُۥ وَذُرِّيَّتَهُۥٓ أَوْلِيَآءَ مِن دُونِى وَهُمْ لَكُمْ
عَدُوٌۢ ۖ بِئْسَ لِلظَّٰلِمِينَ بَدَلًا ﴿٥٠﴾

(18:50) ***And when We said to the angels: Bow down before Adam;***

they all bowed down except Iblīs. He was of the jinn, so he transgressed the commandment of his Lord. What! would you then take him and his offspring for masters rather than Me, and they are your enemy? Evil is (this) change for the unjust.

This is a second reminder to them of what happened between Him and Iblīs when He commanded the angels to bow down before humanity's forefather Adam; they all bowed down except Iblīs. He was one of the jinn and he rebelled against his Lord's commandment.

It means remember this incident so that it will be clear to you that Iblīs—one of the jinn—and his progeny are your enemy. They do not want what is good for you. You should not be tempted by the pleasures and desires of the world that they make look good to you and (you should not) turn your backs on remembrance of God. You should not obey them with regard to the falsehood to which they invite you.

What! would you then take him and his offspring for masters rather than Me, and they are your enemy?: This follows from the brief summary of the incident. The question is rhetorical, expressing disapproval; that is, it follows logically from the incident that you should not take him and his progeny as friends when they are in fact your enemies, O humankind! Thus what is meant by *wilāya* (translated here as "mastership") is the *wilāya* of obedience, such that they obey him and his progeny with regard to what they invite them to, their having taking him and his progeny as objects of obedience instead of God. That is how exegetes have explained it.

It would not be improbable for *wilāya* to mean possession of authority and management, that is, ownership (*rubūbiyya*), because just as idolaters worship angels desiring good from them, so, too, do they worship jinn to avoid harm from them. He explicitly states that Iblīs is of the jinn and has progeny, that man's straying from the path of his happiness and the various kinds of misery which go with it are only on account of Satan's leading him astray. Thus, all together, it means: What? Would you take him and his offspring for gods and lords instead of Me, to worship and endear yourselves to, though they are your enemy?

This explanation is supported by the verse that follows because their not being made witnesses to creation is only compatible with denial of their *wilāya* in the sense of their regulating, not in the sense of their being objects of obedience, as is obvious.

The verse ends by condemning them for taking masters instead of

God, which means taking Iblīs instead of God: *Evil is (this) change for the unjust.* How repugnant that is! No one with any sense would do so. That is the secret in the grammatical shift for rhetorical purpose to the clause, *the commandment of his Lord*, as opposed to "Our commandment."

Exegetes have various explanations for why the command to the angels was also addressed to Iblīs, what his being one of the jinn means, and what that in turn means. We have mentioned some of these viewpoints in the exegesis of *Sūrat al-Aʿrāf* [The Heights].

۞مَّآ أَشۡهَدتُّهُمۡ خَلۡقَ ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلۡأَرۡضِ وَلَا خَلۡقَ أَنفُسِهِمۡ وَمَا كُنتُ مُتَّخِذَ ٱلۡمُضِلِّينَ عَضُدٗا ٥١

(18:51) ***I did not make them witnesses*** **(ashhadtuhum)** ***of the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor of the creation of their own souls; nor would I take those who lead (others) astray for helpers*** **(ʿaḍudan).**

It is apparent from the context that the plural pronouns refer to Iblīs and his progeny. *Ishhād* (as in, *ashhadtuhum*) means summoning and declaring as witnesses the same way that *shuhūd* are eyewitnesses. An *ʿaḍud* means a person's upper arm (between the elbow and the shoulder). It has been metaphorically borrowed because its meaning is similar to *yad* (hand or arm). That is what it means here—"to lend a hand."

The verse makes two arguments refuting the idea that Iblīs and his progeny have been given control to regulate the universe (*wilāyat al-tadbīr*).

First, directing something means having comprehensive knowledge, in the full sense of the word, of those matters in respect to which they are directed and knowledge of whatever internal and external links that thing and those matters have—what they originate from, what is concomitant to them, and where they end up. There is an existential link between the constituent parts of the universe. God did not make Iblīs and his offspring witnesses to His creating the heavens and the earth or even of the creation of themselves. They were not witnesses when He said to the heavens and the earth: "Be!" and they came into being, or when He told Iblīs and his offspring: "Be!" and they came into being. Thus they are ignorant of the reality of the heavens and the earth, and of the secrets of creation inside

the bounds of their individual existence. They are even ignorant of the reality of the fashioning of themselves, so how can they be in charge of regulating their affair or even part of it. How can they be gods or lords instead of God when they are ignorant of the reality of the creation of the heaven and earth, and even the creation of their own selves?

They did not witness the creation of the heavens and the earth because they are all limited, with no way of understanding what is beyond themselves. Anything else is hidden from them, with a veil cast over it. This is clear; God informed us of this in various parts of His revelation. Similarly, the matter of (causational) causes preceding his own existence and the consequences which will follow his existence are hidden from him.

For anyone who looks carefully and scrutinizes [the matter, they will see that] this is a rational proof as opposed to an argumentative one. [Scrutiny is necessary] so as not to confuse this game that we call planning with the cosmological planning [of God], which neither errs nor strays, and [not to confuse] conjecture and mistaken belief, which we circulate and rely on, with eyewitness knowledge, which is true knowledge. The careful investigator will also not confuse knowledge of unseen matters usually guessed by their signs and indications with true knowledge of the unseen through which the unseen becomes seen.

Second, every species of creation is directed through its instinct to strive toward a form of perfection specific to its species. This is elementary to anyone who researches and scrutinizes their condition. Divine guidance is available for everyone, as He says: *He who gave to everything its creation, then guided it (to its goal)* (20:50).

The *shayṭān*s are evil mischief-makers who lead people astray, so their stepping up to regulate any of the affairs of the heavens, earth, or humankind—something that will never happen unless God so permits—would lead to a contradiction of the divine custom (*sunna*) of guidance for all, namely, (it would mean) steering people to what is good via something whose only purpose is troublemaking and toward guidance through something whose speciality is leading people astray. This is impossible.

This is what the clause, *nor could I take those who lead (others) astray for helpers*, means. The apparent meaning is that it is not His custom (*sunna*) to take those who lead others astray as helpers. Understand this!

His saying, *I did not make them witnesses*, and, *nor would I*, instead of "they were not witnesses" and "they were not", is proof that He is the

Subduer (*al-Qāhir*), the Master (*al-Muhaymin*) over them in any event. Those who say that devils, angels or others are partners with God in the matter of regulating affairs do not say that they are autonomous in that respect but rather that they are put in possession of the matter of God. (According to these people) it is delegated to them through delegation by Him—they are lords and gods and God is the Lord of lords and God of gods.

The above interpretation of the verse is based construing *ishhād* in the literal sense of the word and the two third person plural pronouns in, *I did not make them witnesses*, and, *their own souls*, as referring to Iblīs and his offspring—that which is apparent and suggests itself strongly from the context. Nevertheless, exegetes have expressed other opinions, including (the following).

Opinion 1: Making them witnesses to the creation of the heavens and the earth is a metaphor for consulting them. This is because the lowest level of putting someone in charge of something is to consult him about it. The denial of having their help means a denial of all other levels of getting help, and this leads to their becoming in charge of and having authority over their charges in some way. It is as if what was said was: "I did not consult them in the matter of the creation of the heavens and the earth and did not seek any kind of help from them, so where could their authority over them come from?"

Comment: There is no contextual support (*qarīna*) for this metaphorical meaning and there is nothing to prevent the words from being construed literally. Besides, there is no link between being consulted over something and being put in charge of it, such that consultation should constitute any level of putting the consultant in charge or being consulted should constitute any level of being put in charge.

Opinion 2: Some explain this by saying that making them witnesses is an allusion to consultation. An inevitable part of consultation means creating them as they wish—that is, creating them as they want; namely, creating them perfect. Not making the *shayṭān*s witnesses to their own creation means that they were not created perfect, and so they would not be able to be in charge of regulating affairs.

Comment: As well as having the same problem as the previous explanation, (note the following):

a) It boils down to saying something but meaning something separated

by five levels of implication. Consultation is concomitant to making someone a witness according to the claim. Creating as per the consultant's wishes is concomitant to making him a consultant. Creating what the consultant likes is concomitant to creating what is pleasing to the consultant. Creating the consultant perfect is concomitant to creating what is pleasing to the consultant. The propriety of the consultant's being put in charge is concomitant to his being created perfect. The clear Book is too sublime for such riddles as saying "making witnesses" but actually meaning creating perfect, or the propriety of putting them in charge via allusion to what is concomitant to the meaning, four or five times removed.

b) Even if it is correct, it is only correct with regard to making them witnesses to their own creation and not to making them witnesses to the creation of the heavens and the earth. This would mean having to split "witness to their own creation" from "witness to the creation of the heavens and the earth."

c) The inevitable implication of this explanation is that it would be correct for those who are created perfect, such as the favored angels, to be in charge. It contains a concession that it is possible for them to be in charge and possible for them to be lords. However, this is explicitly refuted by the Qur'an. A contingent being which in itself is in need of God is a far cry from being autonomous in regulating itself and others: *Then those who regulate the affair* (79:5), the explanation of which will come (in that section), God willing.

Opinion 3: The literal meaning of making them witnesses is intended, and the two third-person plural pronouns refer to the satans. However, making them witnesses to the creation of their *selves* means making them witnesses to each other's creation, not each individual's being made witness to his own creation.

Comment: Negating their being made witness is the result of negating their being in charge. None of the polytheists has ever said that any of the satans are in charge of any of the others. The purpose is not to negate *wilāya*, such that the wording of the verse would be construed as referring to some of them as witnesses over the creation of others.

Opinion 4: The first pronoun refers to the satans and the second to the unbelievers alone, or to them and other people. The meaning thus rendered is: "I have not made the satans witness to the creation of the heavens and the earth, or to the creation of the unbelievers or people

generally—which would have made them masters over them (if I had)."

Comment: This would require that the two pronouns refer to two different things.

Opinion 5: The two pronouns refer to the unbelievers. Imam al-Rāzī says in his exegesis:

> "I think the most likely explanation is that they (the two pronouns) refer to the unbelievers who told the Messenger: If you do not cast those poor people from your seated gathering we will not believe in you. It is as if He is saying: 'Those who came up with this invalid suggestion and pointless vexation were not My partners in regulating the world as evidenced by My not making them witness to the creation of the heavens and the earth or their own creation. I did not get their help in regulating the world or the hereafter. On the contrary, they are just the same as the rest of creation, so why did they have the audacity to come up with this invalid suggestion?' It is similar to someone who makes mighty suggestions to you. You would tell him, 'You are not the sultan of the land such that we should accept these enormous suggestions, so why are you making them to us?'"

This is supported by the fact that a pronoun should refer to the closest thing mentioned. In this verse this is those unbelievers because they are those who are meant by "the unjust" in the sentence, *Evil is (this) change for the unjust*.

Comment: It is a break in the context for the content of the verse to depend—by way of allusion—on what was dealt with in, *and do not follow him whose heart We have made unmindful* (twenty-three verses earlier), when the discourse is already referring back to the beginning of the chapter, time and again, with parable after parable, and reminder after reminder. The meaning he believes to be possible is extremely unlikely.

Furthermore, the aforementioned suggestion to the Prophet: "If you do not cast those poor people from your seated gathering we will not believe in you," is a suggestion which has nothing to do with regulating the affairs of the world, such that, *I did not make them witnesses*, should be a reply to it. On the contrary, it just makes their becoming believers contingent upon his casting out those people without being based on any claim to be witnesses. Although, if they had contented themselves with just saying: "Cast those poor people out from your seated gathering," there

would have been some substance to Imam al-Rāzī's explanation.

It is as if avoiding this point led some others to offer an alternative explanation for the verse also based on believing the two pronouns to refer to the unbelievers—it means that they were ignorant of what the Pen sempiternally[1] wrote on the matter of happiness and misery because they did not witness creation. How can they then suggest your drawing them to you and casting out the poor.

Opinion 6: A similar explanation, it means: "I did not make them privy to the secrets of creation. They did not acquire anything exclusive from Me which singles them out from anyone else, such that their believing in you should be an example for people to follow. So, do not desire their assistance—it is not appropriate for Me to get help for My religion from those who lead others astray."

Comment: Both explanations are even more unlikely than Imam al-Rāzī's. How far removed the verse is from meaning what they have concocted!

Opinion 7: The two pronouns refer to the angels. Thus, it means: "I did not make the angels witnesses to the creation of the world or of themselves such that they be worshiped instead of Me." It should be added to that, that, *nor could I take those who lead (others) astray for helpers*, addresses the refutation of the satans guardianship. Put together, the verse, beginning and end, refutes both groups' guardianship. Otherwise, the end of the verse alone refutes it.

Comment: The previous verse only addressed the unbelievers with regard to their claim that the satans are guardians. It then refers to them with a plural pronoun in (the clause), *and they are your enemies*, but does not address any of the angels' affairs. Thus claiming that the two pronouns refer to the angels and not the satans is a disruption to the logic. Busying itself with refuting a belief that the angels are in charge constitutes addressing something not required in the verbal context (*siyāq*) and not dictated by the purposive context (*maqām*).

وَيَوْمَ يَقُولُ نَادُوا۟ شُرَكَآءِىَ ٱلَّذِينَ زَعَمْتُمْ فَدَعَوْهُمْ فَلَمْ يَسْتَجِيبُوا۟ لَهُمْ
وَجَعَلْنَا بَيْنَهُم مَّوْبِقًا ﴿٥٢﴾

(18:52) ***And on the day when He shall say: Call on those whom***

1 Similar to "eternally" but earthbound. (Ed.)

you considered to be My associates. So they shall call on them, but they shall not answer them, and We will cause a separation between them.

This is a third reminder. It refers to the manifestation of the refutation of the link between the polytheists and their associates on the Day of Resurrection. Thus it is confirmed that none of the claims the polytheists make about them is true.

And on the day when He shall say . . .: The subject of the verb is God, as evidenced by the context. It means: Mention to them the day on which God will tell them, "Call those My associates—those you claimed were My associates. Call on them, but they will not answer you. It will become clear that I do not have associates. If I did, they would respond."

And We will cause a separation* (mawbiqan) *between them: *Mawbiq* is a noun derived from the verb *wabaqa* which means "he perished." Together, it means "We will put a place of perishing between the polytheists and their associates." People have explained this *mawbiq* or place of perishing as hell or a place in hell in which both groups—the polytheists and their associates alike—will perish. However, reflection on His words does not support this interpretation. This is because the verse also uses the word "associates" to refer to angels, some prophets, and some saints (*awliyāʾ*)—they may even be the ones who are mostly meant by "associates." The pronoun used for beings with intellect is used to refer to them repeatedly, and there is no evidence that it only refers to jinn and human rebels in the context. It is argued that the separation made between them is evidence that it only refers to jinn and human rebels, but this is just the first of many flaws in the argument.

Making a, *mawbiq between them*, may mean nullifying and removing the link between them, their having believed there to be a proprietor to property link and cause to effect link between their associates and themselves. That is alluded to by making a *mawbiq* between them, in which the link and relationship perishes without either of the two parties to it perishing. He alludes to this nicely, first by referring to their call to them as *nidā: Call on those* (nādū) *whom you considered to be My associates*. *Nidāʾ* (calling) is only used when the other is far away, so it is evidence of the distance between them.

This same meaning is alluded to elsewhere [in the Qur'an]: *And We do not see with you your intercessors about whom you asserted that they were*

(God's) associates in respect to you; certainly the ties between you are now cut off and what you asserted is gone from you (6:94). *Then We will say to those who associated others (with God): Keep where you are, you and your associates; then We shall separate them widely one from another and their associates would say: It was not us that you served* (10:28).

وَرَءَا ٱلۡمُجۡرِمُونَ ٱلنَّارَ فَظَنُّوٓاْ أَنَّهُم مُّوَاقِعُوهَا وَلَمۡ يَجِدُواْ عَنۡهَا مَصۡرِفٗا ٥٣

(18:53) ***And the guilty shall see the fire; then they shall know*** **(wa ẓannu)** ***that they are going to fall into it*** **(muwāqiʿuhā),** ***and they shall not find a place to which to turn away from it.***

The use of the word "guilty" instead of "those who associated others (with God)" means that it is a general rule which applies to all the guilty. *Ẓannu* means "they shall know"—so people say—and this interpretation is supported by the sentence, *and they shall not find a place to which to turn away from it*.

It is said that *muwāqiʿuhā* means that they are going to fall into the fire. However it would not be surprising if the falling will happen in two ways—they will fall into the fire when they enter it, and the fire will "fall" on them as it is fueled by them.

And they shall not find a place to which to turn away **(maṣrifan)** ***from it:*** *Maṣrif* is a noun of place derived from *ṣarf* which means turning; that is, they shall not find a place to turn toward away from the fire. There is no escape.

وَلَقَدۡ صَرَّفۡنَا فِي هَٰذَا ٱلۡقُرۡءَانِ لِلنَّاسِ مِن كُلِّ مَثَلٖۚ وَكَانَ ٱلۡإِنسَٰنُ أَكۡثَرَ شَيۡءٖ جَدَلٗا

(18:54) ***And certainly We have explained in this Qur'an every kind of example, and man is most of all given to contention*** **(jadalan).**

Something similar was said in 17:89.[1] *Jadal* means discourse by way of dispute and argument. Verses 18:54–59 threaten punishment after previous reminders.

1 See English vol. 25. (Pub.)

وَمَا مَنَعَ ٱلنَّاسَ أَن يُؤۡمِنُوٓاْ إِذۡ جَآءَهُمُ ٱلۡهُدَىٰ وَيَسۡتَغۡفِرُواْ رَبَّهُمۡ إِلَّآ أَن تَأۡتِيَهُمۡ سُنَّةُ ٱلۡأَوَّلِينَ أَوۡ يَأۡتِيَهُمُ ٱلۡعَذَابُ قُبُلٗا ٥٥

(18:55) ***And nothing prevents men from believing*** **(yuʾminū)** ***when the guidance comes to them, and from asking forgiveness*** **(yastaghfirū)** ***of their Lord, except that there [must] befall them the [accustomed] precedent of the former peoples or that the punishment should come [directly] before them.***

The word *yastaghfirū* (asking forgiveness) is linked with the conjunction to *yuʾminū* (believing) thus rendering a meaning of: "And nothing prevents men from believing and seeking forgiveness when the guidance comes."

Except that there [must] befall them the [accustomed] precedent of the former peoples, means, unless they want what was done to the ancient peoples to be done to them—namely, to be destroyed by divine punishment.

The sentence, Or that the punishment should come [directly] before them, is joined with the conjunction to the previous phrase, which in turn was joined with a conjunction to *yuʾminū*. It means, "or wanting punishment to come face to face with them, their seeing it." Becoming believers will not help them at that point because it would mean becoming believers after witnessing the divine retribution. As He says: *But their belief was not going to profit them when they had seen Our punishment . . .* (40:85).

In brief, it means that people do not seek to have faith, which would benefit them. What they want is to be destroyed through the divine punishment just like the ancients. They will perish without becoming believers, or when they see the punishment, they will believe out of desperation, and their belief will not benefit them.

Their being prevented from believing, and the ensuing consequences (*iqtiḍāʾ*) as per the verse, is metaphorical. It means that they have their backs turned on the truth because of their ill intent. Thus the excessive lengths to which exegetes have gone to in explaining and appraising, raising contentions and refuting them is futile.

وَمَا نُرۡسِلُ ٱلۡمُرۡسَلِينَ إِلَّا مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَۚ وَيُجَٰدِلُ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِٱلۡبَٰطِلِ لِيُدۡحِضُواْ بِهِ ٱلۡحَقَّ وَٱتَّخَذُوٓاْ ءَايَٰتِي وَمَآ أُنذِرُواْ هُزُوٗا ٥٦

(18:56) ***And We do not send messengers but as givers of good news and warning, and those who disbelieve make a false contention that they may render null thereby the truth, and they take My communications and that with which they are warned for a mockery.***

This is a consolation to the Prophet so that he does not become distressed by people's rejection and by their turning their backs on the remembrance of God. The messengers were only tasked with giving good news and warning. There is no harm in them not doing more than that. This verse is a return to what was said at the beginning of the chapter, *Then maybe you will kill yourself with grief over them, if they do not believe in this announcement*. The verse (under discussion) also contains a kind of threat to the unbelievers who mock.

Daḥḍ means perishing and *idḥāḍ* means causing to perish or subduing. *Huzūʾ* means mocking. The verbal noun means the same as the object (mockery). The meaning of the verse is clear.

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّن ذُكِّرَ بِـَٔايَـٰتِ رَبِّهِۦ فَأَعْرَضَ عَنْهَا وَنَسِىَ مَا قَدَّمَتْ يَدَاهُ ۚ
إِنَّا جَعَلْنَا عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ أَكِنَّةً أَن يَفْقَهُوهُ وَفِىٓ ءَاذَانِهِمْ وَقْرًا ۖ وَإِن تَدْعُهُمْ
إِلَى ٱلْهُدَىٰ فَلَن يَهْتَدُوٓا۟ إِذًا أَبَدًا ﴿٥٧﴾

(18:57) ***And who is more unjust than the one who is reminded of the communications of his Lord, then he turns away from them and forgets what his two hands have sent ahead? Surely We have placed veils over their hearts lest they should understand it and a heaviness in their ears; and if you call them to the guidance, they will not ever follow the right course in that case.***

This is an expression of the might and enormity of their wrongdoing. Wrongdoing is said to be mighty or enormous, commensurate with whom it is done against. If it is done against God, along with His communications, it is greater than any other wrongdoing.

His words, *forgets what his two hands have sent ahead*, mean that the Prophet is not troubled by those that turn away from the truth and mock him, because he knows the communications are true.

The sentence, *Surely We have placed veils over their hearts lest they should understand it and a heaviness in their ears*, provides an explanation

for why they turn their backs on God's communications, or for that, along with why they forget what their two hands have sent ahead. What the Book means by placing veils over their hearts and heaviness in their ears has already been discussed several times (see above).

The words, And if you call them to guidance, they will not ever follow the right course in that case, is (an expression of) despair of their ever believing once God has placed a veil over their hearts and ears. After that they will not be able to be guided by themselves by comprehending the truth or being directed by the guidance of others through listening and following. The proof of this is in the sentence, *and if you call them to guidance, they will not ever follow the right course in that case*, because it emphasizes the negation and qualifies it with *idhan* ("in that case") which is the consequence and the answer.

Rūḥ al-maʿānī says:

> "Determinists (*Jabriyya*) rely on this verse as evidence for their beliefs, whereas believers in absolute freewill (*qadariyya*) rely on the previous one. [Al-ʿĀlūsī] says: 'It is rare in the Qur'an to find a verse which supports one of these two group's beliefs without a verse in support of the other group's beliefs right beside it. That is nothing but a difficult test which God has cast over His servants to separate scholars firmly grounded in knowledge from followers.'"

Author's comment: Both verses are the truth. The inevitable consequence of that is proof that the servants have freedom of choice in their actions while His proprietary authority stretches over everything, including the servants' deeds. This is the doctrinal position taken by the People of the Household.

وَرَبُّكَ الْغَفُورُ ذُو الرَّحْمَةِ ۖ لَوْ يُؤَاخِذُهُمْ بِمَا كَسَبُوا لَعَجَّلَ لَهُمُ الْعَذَابَ ۚ
بَلْ لَهُمْ مَوْعِدٌ لَنْ يَجِدُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ مَوْئِلًا ﴿٥٨﴾

(18:58) ***And your Lord is forgiving, the Lord of mercy; were He to punish them for what they earn, He would certainly have hastened the chastisement for them; [but] for them there is an appointed time from which they shall not find a refuge.***

The verses, as the reader already knows, are presented to threaten the wrongdoers with punishment—their having acted corruptly with no hope

of any good. This is a reason for punishment to come down, and for it to be immediate without giving them respite because the only result of their remaining would be further corruption. However, God did not make the punishment immediate even though He has decreed it. Instead He has postponed it until some time, the exact date of which only He knows.

The verse threatening them with certain punishment begins with, *And your Lord is Forgiving, the Lord of mercy*. This is to communicate—via the verse's mention of two attributes ("Forgiving" and "the Lord of mercy")—the immediate punishment which their actions dictate. Punishment per se is decreed and retained to give them what they deserve for what they have done, but it is delayed because God is Forgiving, the Lord of mercy.

The whole sentence, *Forgiving, Lord of mercy*, along with, *were He to punish them for what they earn, He would certainly have hastened the chastisement for them*, is like two litigants disputing before a judge. The sentence, *for them there is an appointed time from which they shall not find a refuge*, is like the judgment passed down which satisfies both parties and maintains both rights. It is given the attribute of divine retribution because what they have done calls for punishment. The judgment is also given the attribute of forgiveness and mercy, postponing and not making the punishment immediate. In so doing, the divine forgiveness erases one consequence of the action, namely "immediate" punishment, and the mercy floods them with life, for now.

In summary it means: "Were your Lord to call them to account He would hasten their punishment. However, He has not hastened it because He is Forgiving, the Lord of mercy. He has instead decreed punishment for them, setting an appointed time for them from which they have no refuge."

The statement, *for them there is an appointed time,* is of decree and not a purely declaratory statement. Otherwise, He would have said: "Rather, He has appointed a time for them." Understand this!

The word *ghafūr* is an intensive form, meaning Much-Forgiving. The definite article in *Dhū l-Raḥma* (lit. Possessor of mercy) means that the whole genus is intended. Thus it is an attribute indicating that the mercy applies to everything. It is a more comprehensive meaning than *raḥmān* or *raḥīm* which both mean having much mercy or always and eternally being merciful. The word *ghafūr* is like the phrase *Dhū l-Raḥma's* servant. The term *Dhū l-Raḥma* can be used appropriately when any blemishes of impediment have been erased. Once it becomes an appropriate instance,

Dhū l-Raḥma applies. The word *ghafūr* has to do all the hard work while the word *Dhū l-Raḥma* stretches out and covers wherever there is no impediment. This is why the intensive form *ghafūr* is used to talk about His Forgiveness and *Dhū l-Raḥma*—which refers to the whole genus of mercy (*raḥma*)—are used. So, understand this, and leave aside the excessively verbose discussions found elsewhere on the two names.

وَتِلْكَ ٱلْقُرَىٰٓ أَهْلَكْنَٰهُمْ لَمَّا ظَلَمُوا۟ وَجَعَلْنَا لِمَهْلِكِهِم مَّوْعِدًا ﴿٥٩﴾

(18:59) ***And* (as for)** ***these towns, We destroyed them* (ahlaknāhum)** ***when they acted unjustly, and We have appointed a time for their destruction.***

"Towns" is a metaphor for the inhabitants of the town, as evidenced by the pronouns and the verb form used to refer back to "towns." *Mahlik* (lit. time of destruction) is a noun of time.

The meaning of the verse is clear. It explains: "Delaying and postponing their destruction is not a new thing for God. Rather, that was the divine custom with regard to previous nations whom God destroyed when they did wrong. God would destroy them, appointing a time for their destruction."

Thus, it is clear that the punishment and destruction to which the verses refer are not punishment on the Day of Resurrection but instead punishment in this world, such as the punishment at the Battle of Badr, if what is meant is a threat against Quraysh's elite, or punishment at the end of time if it is meant as a threat against the Muslim community. This was explained in the exegesis of *Surat Yūnus*.

Examining Narrations

(1) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* says regarding the words (of God), *what a book is this!:*

Khālid b. Najīḥ narrates on the authority of Abū ʿAbdullāh: "When it is the Day of Resurrection, every person will be given his book and told: 'Read.' I asked: 'Will he recognize what is in it?' He replied: 'He will remember it.' There will not be a single moment, word, movement of a foot, or anything he has done which is not mentioned, as if he has done it that very instant. That is why they will say, *Ah! woe to us! what a book is this! it does not*

omit a small one or a great one, but takes account of them (all)."

Author's comment: This narration—as you can see—makes what a person remembers identical to what he recognizes from that book. Thus what he remembers is what is written in it. If it was not for the presence of his very act, the case cannot be made against him, and he will be able to deny it.

(2) *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says regarding the words, *and your Lord does not deal unjustly with anyone*:
"They will find everything they have done written down."

(3) *Al-Burhān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* says on the authority of Ibn Bābawayh via his chain of narration on the authority of Abū Muʿammar al-Saʿdān on the authority of ʿAlī:
"And the guilty shall see the fire, then they shall know (*ẓannū*) that they are going to fall into it" means they are certain they are going to enter it.

(4) *Al-Durr al-manthūr* says that Aḥmad, Abū Yaʿla, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn Ḥibbān, al-Ḥākim (who says it is authentic), and Ibn Mardawayh relate from Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī on the authority of God's Messenger:
"On the Day of Resurrection, the unbeliever will be made to stand for fifty thousand years, as did not happen in the world. The unbeliever will see hell and think that it is falling on him from a distance it would take forty years to travel."

Author's comment: This supports the aforementioned interpretation of *muwāqaʿa* (falling) as meaning both the unbelievers falling into the hellfire and the hellfire falling onto them.

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Verses 60–82

Introduction

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The story told by God about Moses and the learned one who knew the interpretation of events, the one that he [Moses] met at the junction of the two seas, is the fourth reminder after the commandment He gave at the beginning of the chapter to be patient and to carry on delivering His message. It comes after the reassurance over what he [the Prophet] witnessed of the people turning away from the remembrance of God and devoting themselves to the world. He made it clear that what they were engrossed with is embellishment given in advance and finite enjoyment. What he encountered—their obviously enjoying life and succeeding at what they desire in life—should not bother him. This is because behind this outer shell, there is a hidden depth, and, above their power over what they desire is the divine power.

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It is as if the reminder of the story of Moses and the learned one alludes to the fact that there is an explanation for these realities and incidents which affect what worldly people desire. The explanation will become clear to them when the Book reaches its end and God allows them to wake up from the sleep of obliviousness and they are raised for a creation different from the current one. On the day on which the interpretation comes, those who forgot before will say: . . . *the Messengers of our Lord (indeed) brought the truth* . . . (7:53).

The Moses mentioned in the story is the one who was a messenger (*rasūl*) and prophet (*nabī*), the son of ʿImrān—one of those endowed with constancy according to Shīʿah and Sunnī narrations.

Alternatively, it is claimed that he was one of the grandsons of Joseph (Yūsuf) son of Jacob (Yaʿqūb)—Moses, the son of Mīshā, the son of Joseph. He was one of the Israelite prophets. This is unlikely because the Qur'an mentions Moses several times—one hundred and thirty odd times—as the son of ʿImrān. If someone else had been meant in this story there would have been a contextual indicator to show he was not the same person.

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It is (also) claimed that the story is fictitious, formed with the aim of

the perfection of knowledge which puts humankind at the source of the spring of life and gives them its water to drink—that is, eternal life after which there is no death and everlasting happiness, above which there is no happiness whatsoever.

The problem with this interpretation is that it is a conjecture, not based on any evidence. There is no mention in the story told by the Qur'an of this spring of life apart from spurious claims made by exegetes and writers of historical fiction, which do not have any Qur'anic basis that can be relied on as evidence or any physical evidence of a spring of this description in any region of the world.

The servant mentioned by God and said to belong to Moses is claimed to be Yūshaᶜ (Joshua) b. Nūn, his inheritor. Narrations say that he was called a servant because he was always with him, on journeys and in residence or because he served him.

The learned one met by Moses, described beautifully by God as, *one from among Our servants whom We had granted mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Ourselves*, but not named, was, according to narrations, called al-Khiḍr. He was one of the prophets contemporary to Moses. Some say that God bestowed longevity upon him and so he is still alive, having never died. There is no harm in what has been said thus far because there is no incontrovertible rational or textual evidence to contradict it. There has been much discussion about the identity of al-Khiḍr among the people, as in mentioned in long books of exegesis. There are many stories and tales about sightings of him but in spite of that, the narrations and stories are not free of fabricated or interpolated yarns.

Commentary

وَإِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِفَتَىٰهُ لَآ أَبْرَحُ حَتَّىٰٓ أَبْلُغَ مَجْمَعَ ٱلْبَحْرَيْنِ أَوْ أَمْضِىَ حُقُبًا ﴿٦٠﴾

(18:60) ***And when Moses said to his servant: I will not cease until I reach the junction of the two seas, or I will go on for years.***

The adverbial phrase (*I will not cease*) hangs on something which is implied. The sentence is joined with a conjunction to the passage to which all three of the previous reminders were joined. *Lā abraḥ* means, "I will

not cease." It is a defective verb, the predicate of which is omitted for the sake of brevity because it is already implied by *ḥattā ablugh* (until I reach). It implies: "I will not stop walking or traveling." It is claimed that *majmaᶜ al-baḥrayn* means where the Mediterranean to the east and the Persian Gulf to the west meet.[1] *Ḥuqub* means an age or time. Using the word in the indefinite indicates an implied adjective—a long time.

All together, it means—though God knows best: "Remember when Moses told his servant, I will not stop traveling until I reach the place where the two seas meet or I go on for a long time."

فَلَمَّا بَلَغَا مَجۡمَعَ بَيۡنِهِمَا نَسِيَا حُوتَهُمَا فَٱتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُۥ فِي ٱلۡبَحۡرِ سَرَبٗا ﴿٦١﴾

(18:61) ***So when they had reached the junction of the two (seas) they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the sea*** **(saraban)**, ***going away.***

It is likely that *majmaᶜa baynihima* (lit. the junction of between the two) is an example of annexing an adjective to the noun it describes. The basis of it is, *bayn al-baḥrayn* (between the two waters)—this *bayn* (between) being described as the junction of the two.

"They forgot their fish" proves that the fish was either a salted or fried one which they took with them as provisions on their journey. It was not alive and only came back to life there, making its way into the sea. The servant saw it come back to life, diving into the sea, forgot to mention that to Moses and Moses forgot to ask him where it was. Based on this interpretation, "they forgot their fish" attributes forgetting to both of them; they forgot the current status of their fish—Moses forgot its being in the large basket and did not check it. The servant forgot it when he failed to tell Moses of the wonder he had seen pertaining to its affair. This is what people say.

The reader should note that the verses do not explicitly state that the dead fish came back to life. On the contrary, the literal meaning of *nasiyā ḥūtahumā* (they forgot their fish) and similarly (the meaning) of *nasiya al-ḥūt* is that they had put it somewhere on the rock above the sea and then it had fallen into the sea, the waves had lapped it up or something

1 Based on this interpretation, the use of the word *majmaᶜ* meaning junction or where they meet is somewhat metaphorical. (Trans.)

similar to that. It disappeared into it and sank into its depths miraculously as if entering a tunnel. This interpretation is supported by what some oral traditions say, that is, that the sign was losing the fish, not its coming back to life. However, God knows best.

And it took its way into the sea **(saraban)*****, going away:*** A *sarab* is where one travels or walks. A *sarab* or *nafaq* means an impermeable tunnel dug into the earth. It is as if the path taken by the fish in the water is likened to a tunnel taken by a traveler, disappearing into it.

فَلَمَّا جَاوَزَا قَالَ لِفَتَىٰهُ ءَاتِنَا غَدَآءَنَا لَقَدْ لَقِينَا مِن سَفَرِنَا هَٰذَا نَصَبًا ﴿٦٢﴾

(18:62) ***But when they had gone farther, he said to his servant: Bring to us our morning meal, certainly we have met with fatigue from this our journey.***

Majmaʿ al-bayān says:

> "*Nasab*, *wasab*, and *tiʿb* are all synonyms meaning the weakness which results from exertion. *Ghadaʾ* means that which is eaten as a morning meal. This shows that this was during the daytime."

What it means is that when they passed the point where the two seas meet, Moses told his servant to bring their morning meal—the fish they had been carrying with them so that they could eat it, tired as they were from their journey.

قَالَ أَرَءَيْتَ إِذْ أَوَيْنَآ إِلَى ٱلصَّخْرَةِ فَإِنِّى نَسِيتُ ٱلْحُوتَ وَمَآ أَنسَىٰنِيهُ إِلَّا ٱلشَّيْطَٰنُ أَنْ أَذْكُرَهُۥ ۚ وَٱتَّخَذَ سَبِيلَهُۥ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ عَجَبًا ﴿٦٣﴾

(18:63) ***He said: Did you see when we took refuge on the rock then I forgot the fish, and nothing but the Shayṭān made me forget it—to speak of it—and it took its way wondrously into the river.***

This refers to when they reached the point where the two seas meet and they stayed there, because there was a rock there, as evidenced by (the previous clause), *and it took its way into the sea, going away*. As mentioned above, that happened where the two seas meet. He told Moses: "We have nothing to eat as a morning meal because our morning meal was supposed to be the fish. However, it came back to life, entered the sea, and went away when we reached where the two seas meet and took refuge on

the rock which was there. I forgot to tell you about that."

Did you see when we took refuge on the rock—refers to taking refuge on the rock and staying there to rest a little.

The clause, *then I forgot the fish*, means I forgot the state of the fish which I witnessed and so I did not mention it to you. Proof of that—so people say—is in the clause, *and nothing but the Shayṭān made me forget it—to speak of it*, because, *an adhkurahu* (to speak of it) is in apposition to the pronoun in, *ansānīhu* (made me forget it). The implied meaning is, nothing but the Shayṭān made me forget to mention the fish to you. He did not forget the fish itself. Rather, he forgot to mention to Moses its state, which he had witnessed.

There is no harm in the servant's attributing his forgetting to the Shayṭān even if the servant was Joshua b. Nūn the Prophet—divinely protected as prophets are from the Shayṭān—because they are protected from what results from disobedience. As for mere annoyance by the Shayṭān with regard to what does not result from disobedience, there is no evidence against it. He says: *And remember Our servant Job* [Ayyūb], *when he called upon his Lord: The Shayṭān has afflicted me with toil and torment* (38:41).

The basis of the clause, *and it took* (wa-ttakhadha) *its way wondrously* (ʿajaban) *into the river*, is "and it took its way into the river a wondrous taking (*ittikhadhan ʿajaban*)." *ʿAjaban* (wonderful) is an adjective and it takes the place of the implied noun which it describes—a taking (*ittikhadhan*). The noun implied, *ittikhadhan*, is an absolute object. Alternatively, it is claimed that the expression, *and it took its way into the river*, is what the servant said and "what a wonder" (*ʿajaban*) is what Moses said. However the context (of the verse) refutes this interpretation.

The reader should note that what was said above about the clause, *they forgot their fish*, applies here too, but God knows best.

قَالَ ذَٰلِكَ مَا كُنَّا نَبۡغِۚ فَٱرۡتَدَّا عَلَىٰٓ ءَاثَارِهِمَا قَصَصًا ﴿٦٤﴾

(18:64) *He said: This is what we sought* (kunnā nabghi); *so they returned* (fa-rtaddā) *retracing* (qaṣaṣan) *their footsteps* (āthārihim).

Baghy means seeking. *Irtidād* means returning to the beginning. *Āthārihim* means their footsteps. *Qaṣaṣ* means following a track. All together, it means Moses said: That which happened—the matter of the

fish—is what we were seeking. So they traced their footsteps back, following them.

That is what we sought, reveals that Moses had been commanded by revelation to meet the learned one where the two seas met. The marker for the place where he would find and meet him was what had happened—the matter of the fish, either specifically its coming back to life and going off into the sea, or, in vague and general terms, for example, the fish's being lost, its coming back to life, the dead coming back to life or something similar. That is why when Moses heard what he heard from his servant—the matter of the fish—he said what he said, they returned to the place they had left, and, *found one from among Our servants*.

فَوَجَدَا عَبْدًا مِّنْ عِبَادِنَآ ءَاتَيْنَٰهُ رَحْمَةً مِّنْ عِندِنَا وَعَلَّمْنَٰهُ مِن لَّدُنَّا عِلْمًا ﴿٦٥﴾

(18:65) ***Then they found one from among Our servants whom We had granted mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Ourselves.***

Every blessing is a mercy from Him. However, natural causes play a part in and act on some of them, for example, the various kinds of apparent blessings. In others, natural causes play no part, for example, esoteric blessings such as prophethood, the various branches and levels of guardianship (*wilāya*). Specifying the mercy as being "from Us"—the likely meaning of which is that it is a gift from Him, not anyone else's doing—gives the impression that it is one of the second kind, that is, esoteric blessings. Guardianship in its true sense being His alone—as in (the verse), *But God is the Guardian* (42:9)—and prophethood's being something in which the noble angels have a part to play, for example, in revelation, lends support to exegetes' interpretation of the words, "mercy from Us" as prophethood. This is because of the use of the first person plural as opposed to the first person singular indicative of prophethood as opposed to guardianship. However, God knows best.

The words, *and whom We had taught knowledge from Ourselves*, is like the mercy from Him which is unrelated to normal causes like sensation and thought such that it be something which can be acquired. What proves that is the phrase, *from "Ourselves*." Thus, it is gifted, not acquired

knowledge exclusive to His friends (*awliyāʾ*). The last verse of the story indicates that it was knowledge of how to interpret events.

قَالَ لَهُۥ مُوسَىٰ هَلْ أَتَّبِعُكَ عَلَىٰٓ أَن تُعَلِّمَنِ مِمَّا عُلِّمْتَ رُشْدًا ﴿٦٦﴾

(18:66) ***Moses said to him: Shall I follow you in return for your teaching me right*** **(rushdan)** ***knowledge of what you have been taught?***

The word *rushd*, the opposite of *ghayy* (error), means correct understanding. In this verse it is either a purposive object or direct object. It means Moses said to him: "Shall I follow you on the condition that you teach me [some] of what you have been taught so I may be guided by it, or that you teach me [some] of what you have been taught."

قَالَ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِىَ صَبْرًا ﴿٦٧﴾

(18:67) ***He said: Surely you cannot have patience with me.***

This is an emphatic denial of his being able to have any patience in the face of anything he will witness him doing while teaching him. The proof of that is:

a) In the use of the emphatic *inna* (surely) and putting *ṣabr* (patience) in the indefinite after the negative which renders a meaning of any patience whatsoever.

b) Saying you will not have *istitaʿa*—that is, not be able—to have patience is more emphatic than simply saying you will not have patience.

c) Negating with *lan* (will never) as opposed to saying, *la tuṣbir* (you will not have patience).

d) The action is dependent upon ability, constituting negation of the action by negation of one of the causes of the action.

e) Negating patience by negating the cause of being able to be patient, that is, having comprehensive *khubr* (see below) and knowledge of the reality and interpretation of the incident through which one would know that it has to happen in accordance with that reality.

He said Moses would not be able to have the patience for what he [al-Khiḍr] did on the basis of what he knew—he said, *Surely you cannot have patience with me*, and did not say Moses would not be able to have the patience for his [al-Khiḍr's] knowledge per se. He did not say: "You

will not have the patience for and not be able to withstand what I know". Moses was not indignant with al-Khiḍr when he told him the interpretation of what Moses had seen with him. Moses was only indignant with him when he saw the actions themselves, which al-Khiḍr showed him in the process of teaching him. Thus there is one rule for knowledge and another for seeing what is done on the basis of that knowledge. It is like when Moses returned from the meeting place to his people and saw that they had worshiped the calf after he had gone; he was filled with rage, threw down the tablets, and took his brother by the head, dragging him toward him. God had told him about that while he was at the meeting place but he did not do anything like what he later did, even though God's word is more truthful than physical experience. The full story is in Sūrat al-Aʿrāf (The Heights).

Surely you cannot have patience with me, tells Moses that he will not be able to withstand the teaching method employed by al-Khiḍr if he followed him and not that Moses would not be able to withstand the knowledge.

وَكَيۡفَ تَصۡبِرُ عَلَىٰ مَا لَمۡ تُحِطۡ بِهِۦ خُبۡرٗا ٦٨

(18:68) ***And how can you be patient regarding that which you do not encompass in knowledge*** **(khubran)?**

The word *khubr* means knowledge. Grammatically, it is a specification (*tamyīz*).

قَالَ سَتَجِدُنِيٓ إِن شَآءَ ٱللَّهُ صَابِرٗا وَلَآ أَعۡصِي لَكَ أَمۡرٗا ٦٩

(18:69) ***He said: If God pleases, you will find me patient and I shall not disobey you in any matter.***

Moses promised him to be patient but made that conditional on God's will, so he had not told a lie when he was not patient. *Wa la aʿsi. . .* (I shall not disobey . . .) is joined with a conjunction to *ṣabiran* (*patient*) on account of the verbal meaning it comprises. Thus, the promise not to disobey him is also conditional upon God's will and Moses did not break his promise when he did not follow his order not to ask questions.

قَالَ فَإِنِ ٱتَّبَعۡتَنِي فَلَا تَسۡـَٔلۡنِي عَن شَيۡءٍ حَتَّىٰٓ أُحۡدِثَ لَكَ مِنۡهُ ذِكۡرٗا ٧٠

(18:70) *He said: If you would follow me, then do not question me about anything until I myself speak to you about it.*

It is likely that *minhu* ("*about it*") is connected to *dhikran* (lit. "*mention*"). *Iḥdāth al-dhikr* of something means initiating talk of it without anything preceding it. All together, it means: "If you follow me, do not ask me about any of my business which you see, and which is difficult for you to watch, until I initiate a talk about it." It comprises an allusion to the fact that he will see him do things which will be difficult for him to watch. He will explain them to him but Moses should not initiate questioning him and inquiring. Instead, he should wait patiently until al-Khiḍr initiates telling him.

Moses behaved with the exceptional good manners and etiquette of a conscientious pupil with al-Khiḍr—according to these verses. This is amazing, given that he was the one to whom God spoke (*Kalīm Allāh*), Moses, son of ʿImrān, the Messenger Prophet and one of those endowed with constancy, the recipient of the Torah.

What he says from first to last is founded on humility. First, he was polite to him—he did not present his request to be taught by him in the imperative but rather as a question—a suppression of his own appetite. He called accompanying al-Khiḍr "following him". He did not suggest being taught as a condition. On the contrary he said, "in return for your teaching me". Next, he deemed himself to be a learner. Next, he aggrandized the level of al-Khiḍr's knowledge by referring to the acquisition of it in the passive, *what you have been taught*, as opposed to what you know. Next, he praised him by saying, *rushdan* (right). Next, he said just "some of what you have been taught (*mimma ʿullimta*)" as opposed to "everything you have been taught (*ma ʿullimta*)." Next he elevated al-Khiḍr's status by referring to his guidance as an order (*amr*) given by al-Khiḍr, considering a breach by him (Moses) of it to be disobedience. Next, he did not take his ease with al-Khiḍr by making an explicit promise. On the contrary he alluded to it by saying, *If God pleases, you will find me patient and I shall not disobey you in any matter.*

Al-Khiḍr was also polite to him by not immediately refusing and instead indicating to him that he would not be able to be patient. Then, when Moses promised to be patient, God willing, he did not command him to follow, distancing himself from what he wanted, saying, *If you would follow me*. Next, he did not categorically forbid him from asking

questions in the form of a pure *nahy mawlawī* (interdiction, punishable if breached). Instead he made it contingent upon Moses' following him by saying, *If you would follow me, then do not question me*, so as to make him understand that he was not forbidding him imperiously. Instead it was something upon which following him was contingent.

فَٱنطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا رَكِبَا فِى ٱلسَّفِينَةِ خَرَقَهَا ۖ قَالَ أَخَرَقْتَهَا لِتُغْرِقَ أَهْلَهَا لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْـًٔا إِمْرًا ﴿٧١﴾

(18:71) ***So they went (their way) until when they embarked in the boat he made a hole in it.*** [Moses] ***said: Have you made a hole in it to drown its passengers? Certainly you have done a grievous thing.***

Imr, means a great calamity. *So they went* (fa-nṭalaqā), follows on logically from what precedes it. The two who went their way were Moses and al-Khiḍr. The literal meaning of this is that Moses' servant did not accompany him on his journey with al-Khiḍr. *Li* in *li-tughriqa ahlahā* (to drown its passengers) is purposive; even though their drowning was the consequence of the sinking and in no way intended by al-Khiḍr, an inevitable consequence may metaphorically be considered to be an intended consequence which he assumed because of its obviousness. It is like when one says: Are you doing such and such a thing to kill yourself? The meaning is obvious.

قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُلْ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِىَ صَبْرًا ﴿٧٢﴾

(18:72) ***He said: Did I not say that you will not be able to have patience with me?***

This is disapproval of Moses' question and a reminder of what he had previously said, *Surely you cannot have patience with me.*

قَالَ لَا تُؤَاخِذْنِى بِمَا نَسِيتُ وَلَا تُرْهِقْنِى مِنْ أَمْرِى عُسْرًا ﴿٧٣﴾

(18:73) ***He said: Blame me not for what I forgot, and do not constrain me to a difficult thing in my affair.***

Rahq, means forcibly muddling while *irhāq* means constraining. It means: "Do not blame me for my forgetting the promise and being

oblivious to it; do not burden me with difficulty in my affair." *Nisyān* may be interpreted as failure to do something but the first meaning is more likely. In any event, these words are an apology.

فَٱنطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا لَقِيَا غُلَٰمًا فَقَتَلَهُۥ قَالَ أَقَتَلْتَ نَفْسًا زَكِيَّةًۢ بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ لَّقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْـًٔا نُّكْرًا ﴿٧٤﴾

(18:74) ***So they went on until, when they met a boy, he slew him.*** **[Moses]** ***said: Have you slain an innocent person who has not*** **[slain]** ***another person? Certainly you have done an evil thing.***

There is some omission (here) for the sake of brevity. The implied meaning is: "So they disembarked from the boat and set off."

Fa qatalahu (he slew him), is joined with the conjunction *fa*, indicative of logical sequence—to the conditional phrase. *Qāla* (*he said*), is the result (apodosis) of *idha* (*when*), based on a literal reading. Thus, it is clear that what is important is the reference to Moses' objection and not the reference to the killing itself. The same applies to the subsequent verse, *So they went on until when they came to the people of a town . . . [Moses] said: If you had pleased*, unlike the previous verse, *So they went (their way) until when they embarked in the boat he made a hole in it. [Moses] said . . .* This is because the result (apodosis) of *idha* (*when*) in the previous verse is, *he made a hole in it*, and *qala*, ([*Moses*] *said*) is a new sentence following a full stop.

Thus, the verses are set out in the form of a single story in which Moses objected to al-Khiḍr three times, one after another and not in the form three objections made during the course of three stories. It is as if what is being said is: Such and such happened and so he objected to it, then objected, then objected again. The story is the story of his objections and so it is a single story, not a story of this one's actions and the other's objections, which would make it three stories.

Thus the difference between the three verses becomes clear—*kharaqaha* (he made a hole in it) made the result (apodosis) of *idha* (when) in the first verse, whereas *qatalahu* (he slew him), *fa wajada* (then they found) and *fa-aqama* (so he put it in a right state) are not made the result (apodosis) in the second and third verses. Instead they are part of the conditional phrase, joined to it with a conjunction. This is something

the reader should note well.

Have you slain an innocent person?: *Zakiyya* means pure in the sense of innocent of sins on account of not reaching adulthood. This is the impression given by the word *ghulāmān* (*a boy*). The question is a rhetorical disapproval. It is Moses who says this.

Bi-ghayri nafs (who has not [slain] another person?) is metaphorical because slaying by a minor is not a capital offense. It may be possible to infer from *bi-ghayri nafs*, that he was an adult because an adult can also be called a *ghulām*. Based on this interpretation, the meaning would be: "Have you unjustifiably slain a person innocent of any capital crime? After all, nothing the *ghulām* (boy) has done warrants it."

Certainly you have done an evil* (nukran) *thing: *Nukr* means a crime against nature, something society has never known. Making a hole in the boat was considered to be *imr*, that is, a calamity resulting in misfortunes the like of which will never be repeated. Slaying a person is a *nukr* or *munkar*, which people consider to be much, much worse than making a hole in a boat. The latter normally causes deaths but does not do so directly.

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قَالَ أَلَمْ أَقُل لَّكَ إِنَّكَ لَن تَسْتَطِيعَ مَعِيَ صَبْرًا ﴿٧٥﴾

(18:75) ***He said: Did I not say to you that you will not be able to have patience with me?***

The meaning of this is clear. The addition of (the clause) "*to you*" is a kind of reproach to him for not listening to his instruction and an allusion to his not having listened to what he told him the first time, *you will not be able to have patience with me*, or had listened but thought that he did not really mean it, instead meaning something else—as if he was saying: "I only meant when I said, *'you will not'*—that is, you, as opposed to anyone else."

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قَالَ إِن سَأَلْتُكَ عَن شَيْءٍ بَعْدَهَا فَلَا تُصَاحِبْنِي ۖ قَدْ بَلَغْتَ مِن لَّدُنِّي عُذْرًا ﴿٧٦﴾

(18:76) ***He said: If I ask you about anything after this, keep me not in your company; indeed you shall have*** (then) ***found an excuse in my case.***

The (pronoun) *"this"* as in *"after this"* refers to this time or the question, that is, if I ask you another question after this time or after this question, do not accompany me or allow me to accompany you.

Qad balaghta min ladunnī—means: "You will have reached an excuse and found a way to excuse yourself from me because your responsibility for me has reached its end."

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فَٱنطَلَقَا حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَآ أَتَيَآ أَهۡلَ قَرۡيَةٍ ٱسۡتَطۡعَمَآ أَهۡلَهَا فَأَبَوۡاْ أَن يُضَيِّفُوهُمَا فَوَجَدَا فِيهَا جِدَارٗا يُرِيدُ أَن يَنقَضَّ فَأَقَامَهُۥۖ قَالَ لَوۡ شِئۡتَ لَتَّخَذۡتَ عَلَيۡهِ أَجۡرٗا ٧٧

(18:77) ***So they went on until when they came to the people of a town, they asked them for food, but they refused to entertain them as guests. Then they found in it a wall which was on the point of falling, so he put it into a right state. If you had pleased, you might certainly have taken*** **(la ttakhadhta)** ***a recompense for it.***

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The same thing can be said about (the phrases), *so they went on*; *but they refused*; *then they found*, and, *so he put it in a right state*, as was said about (the phrases), *so they set off,* and, *he slew him*.

Istaṭʿamā ahlahā (they asked them for food), is adjectival to the word, town. *Istaṭʿamāhum* was not said because of the vulgarity of our saying—*qariyatan istaṭʿamāhum* (a town they asked for food) unlike *atā qariyatan* (lit. he came to a town) in the sense of *ata ahla qariyatin* (he came to the people of a town) because a town can be reached and it is permissible, metaphorically, to say town but actually mean the people of a town. This is not true in the case of asking for food because it is something which can only be done to the people of a town. Thus, "its people" (*ahlahā*) is not an instance of spelling out something which could be said just as well with a pronoun.

The Qur'an does not say, "So they went on until when they came to a town" because that would literally mean the town itself; the main purpose—as the reader already knows—depends on the result (apodosis), that is, *[Moses] said: If you had pleased, you might certainly have taken a recompense for it*. This contains a reference to payment, which can only be from the people and not the town itself. The words, *they came to the people of a town*, prove that he put the wall into a right state in the presence of

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the people of the town. This is what made saying, "taken a recompense from them", or, "taken a recompense from its people" redundant.

Istiṭʿam means asking for food as guests. That is why the Qur'an says, *but they refused to entertain them as guests.*

Then they found in it a wall which was on the point of falling* (an yanqaḍḍa):*** *Inqiḍāḍ*, means falling so here it is used metaphorically to mean on the point of falling and collapsing.

So he put it in a right state* (Fa-aqāmahu):*** al-Khiḍr made it firm by fixing it but He does not say how he put it in a right state—whether by way of a miracle, building or laying down support. However, what Moses said, *If you had pleased, you might certainly have taken a recompense for it*, gives the impression that it was not miraculous, because it is usual for a wage to be taken for something non-miraculous.

If you had pleased, you might certainly have taken* (la ttakhadhta) *a recompense for it: *Takhadha* and *akhadha* mean the same thing.[1] The pronoun "it" refers to *iqāma* (putting in a right state) understood from, *fa-aqāmahu* (so he put it in a right state). It is a verbal noun which can be considered either masculine or feminine. The contexts testifies that they were hungry so Moses mentioned al-Khiḍr's taking a wage for his work because if he had done so, they would have been able to buy food with it to satisfy their hunger.

قَالَ هَٰذَا فِرَاقُ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنِكَ ۚ سَأُنَبِّئُكَ بِتَأْوِيلِ مَا لَمْ تَسْتَطِع عَّلَيْهِ صَبْرًا ﴿٧٨﴾

(18:78) ***He said: This shall be separation between me and you; now I will inform you of the significance of that with which you could not have patience.***

The demonstrative pronoun "this" refers to what Moses said, that is, this thing you said is the reason for the separation between me and you. Alternatively, it refers to the time, that is, the time for separation between me and you. This is what some claim. It could also refer to the separation itself, that is, this separation has come, as if it pertained to the unseen and it was time for it when Moses said, *If you had pleased, you*

1 If recited with a *shadda* above the tāʾ the word comes from *ittakhadha* but if it is recited without a *shadda*, it comes from *takhadha.* (Ed.)

might certainly have taken a recompense for it. Al-Khiḍr said, *this will be separation between me and you*, and not just "between us," for the sake of emphasis. He only said this after the third objection because before that, Moses had apologized to him—the first time—and asked him for another chance—the second time. As for the separation after the third time, Moses had given al-Khiḍr an excuse because he had said after the second objection, *If I ask you about anything after this, keep me not in your company*. The rest is clear.

أَمَّا ٱلسَّفِينَةُ فَكَانَتْ لِمَسَٰكِينَ يَعْمَلُونَ فِى ٱلْبَحْرِ فَأَرَدتُّ أَنْ أَعِيبَهَا وَكَانَ وَرَآءَهُم مَّلِكٌ يَأْخُذُ كُلَّ سَفِينَةٍ غَصْبًا ﴿٧٩﴾

(18:79) ***As for the boat, it belonged to (some) poor men who worked on the sea and I wished to damage it, and there was behind them a king who seized every boat by force.***

This starts explaining in detail what al-Khiḍr had vaguely promised, "*I will inform you*." *An aʿībahā* means "I should damage it." This indicates that *"every boat"* really means every undamaged boat.

And there was behind them a king who seized every boat by force: The word *warāʾ* means "behind," that is, the adverb denoting a place, which is the opposite of the other adverb denoting a place, which a person faces, and which is called before or in front of. However, it can also be said of what a person is oblivious to, where there is someone who wishes him harm or unpleasantness even if it is in front of him, or, where there is something which distracts a person from it, or, where there is something which makes a person too concerned with himself for anything else, like when a person turns his face away from the direction he is facing. He says: *But whoever seeks to go beyond that* (warāʾa dhalika), *these are they that exceed the limits . . .* (23:7); *And it is not for any mortal that God should speak to him except by revelation or from behind* (warāʾa) *a veil . . .* (42:51) and *And God encompasses them on every side* (min warāʾihim muḥīṭ) (85:20).

In brief, it means: "The boat belonged to a number of poor people who worked on the sea, and who made a living from it. There was a tyrannical king who ordered the seizure of the boats, so I wanted to make a hole in it to make it defective so that the tyrant would not covet it and would

leave it to them."

وَأَمَّا ٱلْغُلَٰمُ فَكَانَ أَبَوَاهُ مُؤْمِنَيْنِ فَخَشِينَآ أَن يُرْهِقَهُمَا طُغْيَٰنًا وَكُفْرًا ﴿٨٠﴾

(18:80) ***And as for the boy, his parents were believers and we feared*** **(fa-khashīnā)** ***lest he should overburden them with his impropriety and disbelief.***

What is likeliest from the context of the verse and from (the statement), *and I did not do it of my own accord,* yet to come—is that *khashīnā* means metaphorically, "we were wary of kindness and compassion" and not the literal meaning of the specific emotional state which God and His prophets do not experience. As God says: *Those who deliver the messages of God and fear Him*, *and do not fear anyone but God . . .* (33:39).

Lest he should overburden them with his impropriety and disbelief (an yurhiqahumā ṭughyānan wa kufran), means the boy's making his parents give in to that, that is, driving his parents to disobedience and ingratitude by leading them astray and having a psychological effect on them because of their strong love for them. However, what the next verse says, *wa aqraba ruḥman (*and more caring towards his kin*)*, is not free of endorsement for disobedience and ingratitude actually being two specifying complements to *irhāq* (pressuring), that is, they are two attributes of the boy, not his parents.

فَأَرَدْنَآ أَن يُبْدِلَهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا خَيْرًا مِّنْهُ زَكَوٰةً وَأَقْرَبَ رُحْمًا ﴿٨١﴾

(18:81) ***So we desired that their Lord might give them in his place one better than him in purity*** **(zakatan)** ***and more caring toward his kin*** **(aqraba ruḥman).**

Better than him in terms of *zakat* means better than him in terms of propriety (*ṣalāḥ*) and faith (*īmān*) as contextually indicated by making it the opposite of impropriety (*ṭughyān*) and unbelief (*kufr*) in the previous verse. It is claimed that the root meaning of *zakat* is purity. Nearer to him (*ruḥman)* means more caring toward his kin (*awṣal li-l-raḥim*) and relations so he will not pressure them. The word *aqrab* (nearer) does not fit an interpretation of it as more merciful to them. This, as the reader will realize, supports the interpretation of, *yurhiqahumā ṭughyānan wa-kufran,* in the previous verse as overburdening them with his impropriety and

unbelief, not making them exceed proper bounds and fall into disbelief and overwhelming them to do so.

The verse—in any event—alludes to the fact that his parents' faith was of value to God and they deserved a good son who is caring toward his parents. That which was ordained in the boy was the opposite of that so God commanded al-Khiḍr to slay him so that He could replace him with a child who was better and more caring toward them.

وَأَمَّا ٱلْجِدَارُ فَكَانَ لِغُلَٰمَيْنِ يَتِيمَيْنِ فِى ٱلْمَدِينَةِ وَكَانَ تَحْتَهُۥ كَنزٌ لَّهُمَا
وَكَانَ أَبُوهُمَا صَٰلِحًا فَأَرَادَ رَبُّكَ أَن يَبْلُغَآ أَشُدَّهُمَا وَيَسْتَخْرِجَا كَنزَهُمَا
رَحْمَةً مِّن رَّبِّكَ ۚ وَمَا فَعَلْتُهُۥ عَنْ أَمْرِى ۚ ذَٰلِكَ تَأْوِيلُ مَا لَمْ تَسْطِع عَّلَيْهِ
صَبْرًا ﴿٨٢﴾ ا

(18:82) ***And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them, and their father was a righteous man; so your Lord desired that they should attain their maturity and take out their treasure, a mercy from your Lord, and I did not do it of my own accord. This is the significance of that with which you could not have patience.***

It would not be surprising if it could be inferred from the context that the city mentioned in this verse was not the same as the town in which they found the wall which he put into a right state. If they had been one and the same, there would not have been much need to say that the two orphan boys were in the city. The reader/listener's attention is directed to the point that they and those charged with looking after them were not present in the town.

Mentioning that the boys were orphans, there being a treasure belonging to them under the wall, that if the wall collapsed it would become exposed and be lost, and that their father was righteous, is all a prelude and introduction to (the statement), *so your Lord desired that they should attain their maturity and take out their treasure*, and the clause, *a mercy from your Lord*, explains His desire.

His mercy is the reason for His desiring that they should attain their maturity and take out their treasure. Their taking out their treasure was dependent on al-Khiḍr's fixing the wall. The reason for the mercy's being

sent was the righteousness of their father. It happened that he died, orphaning the two boys, and leaving them a treasure.

There is a lot of discussion about reconciling their father's righteousness with the treasure belonging to them under the wall—the apparent significance of which is that their father had hoarded it. This contention is based on the belief that hoarding is reprehensible as per (the verse): . . . *and (as for) those who hoard up gold and silver and do not spend it in God's way, announce to them a painful chastisement* (9:34).

However, the verse addresses no more than the fact that there was a hoard belonging to them under the wall without indicating that it was their father who had buried and hoarded it. Furthermore, their father's being described as righteous is proof that whatever this hoard was, it was not something reprehensible, assuming that it was their father who had hoarded it. Besides, it is possible that their righteous father could have hoarded it for them for a good reason. What can be more serious than making a hole in a boat and taking the life of a person whose blood should not be spilled—both of which appear in the story and both of which had been made permissible through an explanation by divine command? There are some relevant oral traditions in the discussion below, God willing.

There is proof in the verse that a person's righteousness may cause his children to inherit a nice legacy and might leave them in happiness and goodness. Thus, this verse—about goodness—is like: *And let those fear who, should they leave behind them weakly offspring, would fear on their account* . . . (4:9).

وَمَا فَعَلْتُهُۥ عَنْ أَمْرِىٓ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ تَأْوِيلُ مَا لَمْ تَسْطِع عَّلَيْهِ صَبْرًا ﴿٨٢﴾

(18:82) *And I did not do it of my own accord. This is the significance of that with which you could not have patience* (mā lam tasṭiʿ ʿalayhi ṣabran).

This is an allusion to the fact that whatever he did was by the command of another—that is, God—and not something his own self told him to do.

Ma lam tasṭiʿ alayhi ṣabran means the same as, *mā lam tastaṭiʿ ʿalayhi ṣabran* (that with which you could not have patience). It was explained at the beginning of the exegesis of Surat Āl ʿImrān (Eng. vol. 7) that, according to Qur'anic convention, *taʾwīl* (interpretation) is the reality which something contains, where it originates, and what it is based on, like the

taʾwīl of a dream which means interpretation of it. *Taʾwīl* of a ruling means the reason for it. *Taʾwīl* of an action means the benefit in performing it and its true purpose. *Taʾwīl* of an incident means the true reason for it, etc.

This is the significance of that with which you could not have patience, is an allusion by him [al-Khiḍr] to the fact that the reason he had given for the three incidents and his actions in regard to them was the real reason for them, not the apparent reasons which Moses thought could be related to al-Khiḍr's actions, that is, causing those people's death by making a hole in the boat, unjustifiably slaying the boy, and bad planning over provision regarding the matter of putting the wall in a right state.[1]

Some say that an example of the wonderful politeness shown by al-Khiḍr toward his Lord when speaking—was to attribute those actions not free of fault, to himself, for example, *and I wished that I should damage it*, and to use the third person plural when referring to what could politely be attributed to himself and his Lord, for example, *so we desired*, and, *and we feared*. He also attributed to God alone anything that was exclusive to Him on account of being contingent upon His being Lord (*rubūbiyya*) and His regulation of His property (*tadbīr mulkihi*), for example, *so your Lord desired that they should attain their maturity . . .*

Historical Discussion Divided into Two Sections

1. The Story of Moses and al-Khiḍr in the Qur'an

God revealed to Moses that there was among His servants one who had knowledge which Moses did not have. He told him if he set off to where the two seas meet, he would find him there—it was where the dead fish would come to life or be lost.

Moses resolved to meet the learned one and learn some of the knowledge he had from him, if possible. He told his servant what he had resolved upon and so they set off for where the two seas meet. They took a dead fish with them and walked until they reached where the two seas meet. They

1 It is interesting to note that according to one exegete, the three acts which al-Khidr performed were all the things that Moses had done or got involved before. First he was thrown into the nile as an infant, yet that was to save him and not to drown him. Then he accidentally killed an Israelite who did not deserve to die. And, he also drew water for prophet Shuʿayb daughters without asking any reward. God probably wanted to show Moses that his accusation of al-Khidr could return to him by the same token. (Pub.)

were tired, but there was a rock on the seashore and so they took refuge on it to rest a little. They forgot about their fish, distracted as they were.

All of a sudden, the fish moved about and fell into the sea, having come back to life—or alternatively, fell in, still dead, and sank down. The servant watched it, amazed by its affair. However, he forgot to mention it to Moses until they left the place and set off until they had passed by the place where the two seas meet. They were exhausted and so Moses said: "Bring to us our morning meal, certainly we have met with fatigue from this our journey."

The servant then mentioned the matter of the fish which he had witnessed and told Moses: "Certainly, when we sought refuge on the rock the fish came to life and fell into the sea, swimming in it until it plunged deep. I wanted to mention its affair to you but the Shayṭān made me forget it." In the alternative: "I forgot the fish by the rock, it fell into the sea and sank into it."

Moses said: "That is what we wanted and were looking for. Let us go back there." So they retraced their steps and found one of God's servants whom God had granted mercy from Himself and taught knowledge from Himself. Moses asked this servant if he could follow him, so that he could teach him (Moses) something of the guidance which God had taught him.

The learned one said: "Surely you cannot have patience with what you see of my deeds, the significance of which you have no knowledge of. And how can you be patient regarding that which you do not encompass in knowledge?" So Moses promised him he would be patient and would not disobey any order, God willing. The learned one then told Moses, on the basis of what Moses had requested from him and promised him, "if you would follow me, then do not question me about anything until I myself speak to you about it."

Thereafter, Moses and the learned one set off before embarking aboard a boat with (other) passengers. Moses had no idea what the learned one intended. The learned one then made a hole in the boat so big that it would inevitably sink. That shocked Moses and made him forget what he had promised, so he asked the learned one: "Have you made a hole in it to drown its passengers? Certainly you have done a grievous thing.' The learned one replied: "Did I not say that you will not be able to have patience with me?" Moses apologized to him, saying that he had forgotten his promise to him to be patient: "Blame me not for what I forgot, and do

not constrain me to a difficult thing in my affair."

They continued on a little while and met a boy. The learned one slew him and Moses could not stop himself from becoming indignant and condemning him for it, saying: *Have you slain an innocent person otherwise who has not* [slain] *another person? Certainly you have done an evil thing* (18:74).

The learned one told him a second time: *Did I not say to you that you will not be able to have patience with me?* (18:75).

All Moses had by way of apology and to stop him from leaving him behind—something his soul was not content with—was to ask him to let him stay with him for the time being. He could leave Moses behind if he asked him another question. He asked for another chance by saying: *If I ask you about anything after this, keep me not in your company; indeed you shall have (then) found an excuse in my case* (18:76). The learned one accepted.

They then set off again until they came to a town. They had become hungry and so they asked the townspeople for food, but none of them would entertain them as guests. Then they came across a wall on the brink of collapse—which the people feared—and so the learned one put it in a right state.

Moses said to him: *If you had pleased, you might certainly have taken a recompense for it* (18:77), with which we could have a way to satiate our hunger. We need it because the people are refusing to entertain us as guests.'

The learned one then told him: *This shall be the separation between me and you; now I will inform you of the significance of that with which you could not have patience. As for the boat, it belonged to (some) poor men who worked on the sea and used it to make a living. There was behind them a king who seized every boat by force* (18:78–79). I made a hole in it so that it would be defective and the king would not want it. *As for the boy, he was an unbeliever but his parents were believers. If he had lived on, he would have overburdened them with his unbelief and impropriety* (18:80). However, divine mercy came down on them and He commanded me to slay him so that He could replace him with a purer, more caring child. I slew him as commanded. *As for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city. There was a treasure under it which belonged to them. Their late father was righteous* (18:82), and so divine mercy came down on them

because of their father's righteousness; He commanded me to put it in a right state so that it would remain standing until they attain maturity and dig up their treasure. If it had collapsed, the matter of their treasure would have become exposed and the people would have become aware.

He [al-Khiḍr] said: *I did not do what I did of my own accord* (18:82), but rather by God's command. The significance of it is as I have told you. He then parted with Moses.

2. The Story of al-Khiḍr

The Qur'an says nothing about him apart from what is in the story of Moses' journey to where the two seas meet. There is no mention of any of his attributes apart from (the verse): *Then they found one from among Our servants whom We had granted mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Ourselves* (18:65), and what can be gleaned from prophetic traditions or those via the Imams from among the People of the Household with regard to the story. Muḥammad b. ʿImāra's oral tradition on the authority of al-Ṣādiq says:

> "Al-Khiḍr was a Messenger Prophet dispatched by God, to his people. He called them to belief in His Oneness and to attest to His prophets, messengers, and books. His sign was that whenever he sat on dry wood or barren land, it would turn green (*khaḍrāʾ*). That is why he was called al-Khiḍr (Green Man). His real name was Tālyā son of Mālik son of ʿĀbir son of Arfakhshad son of Sām son of Noah."

This account of his name is supported by what *al-Durr al-manthūr* says, on the authority of the compilers of several collections on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās and Abū Hurayra on the authority of the Prophet: "He was only called al-Khiḍr because he prayed on a white pelt and it turned green."

Some narrations, for example, al-ʿAyyāshī's on the authority of Burayd on authority of one of the two of them say: "al-Khiḍr and Dhū l-Qarnayn were two learned ones but they were not prophets."

However, the verses revealed telling the story of him and Moses are not apparent indications that he was a prophet. This is the case because judgment (*ḥukm*) is said to come down to him.

It is clear from various narrations on the authority of the Imams from among the People of the Household that he is still alive, having not died. It

is not difficult for God to endow some of His servants with a miraculously long life and there is no rational evidence to prove the impossibility of this.

Some narrations[1] reported by the Sunnīs say that the reason for this is that he is the son of Adam's loins and his appointed time to die was put off so that he could reject the Antichrist (*dajjāl*). Others[2] say that Adam prayed for longevity for him—right up until the Day of Resurrection. Several narrations by both sects say that he drank from the Spring of Life—which is in the darkness—when Dhū l-Qarnayn entered the darkness in pursuit of it. Al-Khiḍr was in Dhū l-Qarnayn's vanguard and al-Khiḍr was endowed with longevity, but Dhū l-Qarnayn was not. These and similar traditions are *aḥad*—not narrated by enough people to be indisputable. There is no way to prove them through scripture, irrefutable Sunna or reason.

There are many stories, tales, and similar narrations about al-Khiḍr which should not be paid any attention to by anyone with any sense, as the examples below show.

Khuṣayf's narration:[3] Four prophets are still alive—two in heaven, that is, Jesus and Idrīs—and two on earth, that is, al-Khiḍr and Ilyās. As for al-Khiḍr, he is on the sea. His counterpart is on land.

Al-ʿUqaylī's oral tradition[4] on the authority of Kaʿb: al-Khiḍr is on a pulpit (*minbar*) between the highest and lowest sea. The creatures of the sea have been commanded to listen to him and obey him. Souls are presented to him in the morning and the evening.

Kaʿb al-Aḥbar's narration:[5] al-Khiḍr b. ʿAmīl embarked along with a group of his companions until they reached the Indian Ocean—the China Sea. He then told his companions: Companions, lower me by rope. They lowered him into the sea where he remained for days and nights. He then came back up and they asked him: What did you see, al-Khiḍr? God

1 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of al-Dāraquṭnī and Ibn ʿAsākir on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

2 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn ʿAsākir on the authority of Ibn Isḥāq.

3 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn ʿAsākir on the authority of Ibn Isḥāq.

4 *al-Durr al-manthūr*.

5 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Abū l-Shaykh in *al-ʿAẓama* and Abū Nuʿaym in *al-Ḥilya* on the authority of Kaʿb.

blessed you and protected your life in the depth of this sea. He replied: One of the angels received me and told me: Intrepid son of Adam, where are you going? Where do you come from? I told him: I wanted to see how deep this sea is. He asked me: How? A man during David's time submerged himself without reaching even a third of its depth to date. That was three hundred years ago.

There are other such narrations which tell amazing stories.

Examining Narrations

(1) *Al-Burhān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān* narrates on the authority of Ibn Bābūwayh on the authority of Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad on the authority of ʿImāra on the authority of his father on the authority of Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad:

After God had spoken to Moses, revealed the Torah to him, written a warning in relation to everything and detailed everything for him, put a miracle in his hand and his staff, sent the flood, the locusts, lice, and frogs, Moses parted the sea and God drowned Pharaoh and his hordes, Moses' humanity got the better of him to the point that he said to himself: I do not think that mighty and sublime God has created a creature more knowledgeable than me. God then revealed to Gabriel: Save my servant before he is doomed and tell him: There is a servant at the junction of the two seas. Follow him and learn from him.

Gabriel took what his Lord, had commanded him to Moses and Moses realized that that was because of what his ego had told him. He and his servant Joshua b. Nūn set off until they reached the junction of the two seas. There, they found al-Khiḍr worshiping God, as God says in His Book, *Then they found one from among Our servants whom We had granted mercy from Us and whom We had taught knowledge from Ourselves*.

Author's comment: The hadith is long and mentions Moses' accompanying al-Khiḍr and what transpired between them as mentioned by God in the story in His Book.

The story is narrated from two sources in al-ʿAyyāshī's exegesis, and in al-Qummī's exegesis from two sources, one citing the chain of narration, the other not citing it. It is narrated from many sources in *al-Durr al-manthūr*, from compilers of hadith collections such as al-Bukhārī,

Muslim, al-Nisāʾī, al-Tirmidhī and others on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās on the authority of Kaʿb on the authority of the Prophet.

The hadiths all agree with the beginning of Muḥammad b. ʿImāra's hadith, and state that the fish they were carrying with them came to life at the rock and made its way, plunging into the sea. They disagree, however, on many matters which they all add to the basis of the story in the Qur'an.

This includes what can be inferred from Ibn Bābūwayh and al-Qummī's oral tradition—that the junction between the two seas was in Greater Syria and indeed Palestine, as indicated by their context which states that the town they came to was al-Nāṣira [Nazareth]—the place after which the Naṣārā (Christians) are named. Some say that the land was Azerbaijan; this agrees with what *al-Durr al-manthūr* says on the authority of al-Suddī—that the two seas were the Kur and Araz because they both flow into the sea. The town was called Bājīrwān and its people were miserly. It is narrated that it happened in Africa, on the authority of al-Qarẓī that it was Tangiers and on the authority of Qatāda that it was where the Mediterranean and Persian Gulf meet.

Another example is what some of the narrations say—that the fish was fried. However, most of the others say that it was salted.

Another example is what is said by al-Qummī's narration, which does not state the chain of narration, along with what shaykhs al-Nisāʾī and al-Tirmidhī and others say—that it happened in the desert at the spring of life. Muslim's oral tradition even says that the water was the water of life—whoever drank from it would have everlasting life. Nothing dead would ever get close to it without coming back to life. When they rested and the water came into contact with the fish, it came back to life. Others say that Moses' servant made ablution from minor impurity using the water, a drop fell on the fish and it came back to life. Others say he drank from it but was not supposed to, so al-Khiḍr took him, found him a suitable boat and left the boat in the sea. It will remain between its waves until the Hour comes. Some say that the spring of life from which al-Khiḍr used to drink was at the rock. The rest of the oral traditions are free of any mention of the spring of life.

The four authentic hadith collections and others say that the fish fell in the water and made its way, plunging into the water. God then held back the flow of water from the fish and so it passed along as if in a tunnel. Some of these oral traditions say that after Moses returned, he saw the trail

left by the fish and started following the fish, walking on water until they ended up on one of the Arab islands. Al-Ṭabarī's narration says about the story, on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās: He, that is, Moses, returned until he reached the rock. He found the fish which began bounding through the sea, Moses following it, his staff outstretched, parting the water and following the fish. All the seawater the fish came into contact with dried up, becoming like rock. Other oral traditions say nothing of the sort.

Most say that Moses met al-Khiḍr at the rock and some say that he walked through the tunnel made by the fish or walked on water until he found him on one of the islands on the sea. Some say that he met him sitting or resting on the surface of the water.

And there is disagreement on whether the servant accompanied them or they left him behind.

And there is disagreement over how he made a hole in the boat, how he slew the boy, how he fixed the wall, and over the treasure which was underneath it. However, most of the oral traditions say that it was a gold tablet on which admonitions were engraved. There is also disagreement over their righteous father. Most agree that he was their father, but others say that he was their ancestor going back ten generations, others seven generations, others that seventy generations separated them and others that there were seven hundred years between them and him. There are other differences between the narrations.

(2) *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says, on the authority of ʿAlī b. Bilāl on the authority of Yūnus, regarding a letter they wrote to al-Riḍā asking him about the learned one Moses came to. Which of them was the more knowledgeable? Was it possible for there to be an authority (*ḥujja*) senior to Moses in his time? He wrote in reply: "Moses came to the learned one (*al-ʿālim*) encountering him either sitting or resting on one of the islands in the sea. Moses uttered the greeting of peace but he did not greet him back because there was no peace in the land. He asked: Who are you? He replied: I am Moses son of ʿImrān. He asked: Are you the Moses son of ʿImrān to whom God spoke? He replied: Yes. He asked: What do you need. He replied: I came so you could teach me right knowledge of what you have been taught. He said: I have been charged with something which you will not be able to bear and you in turn have been charged with something which I cannot bear."

Author's comment: Oral traditions to the same effect are narrated by both sects [Sunnī and Shīʿah].

(3) *Al-Durr al-manthūr* says, cited and deemed to be authentic by al-Ḥākim on the authority of Ubayy on the authority of the Prophet:

"When Moses met al-Khiḍr, a bird came along and dipped its beak in the water. Al-Khiḍr asked Moses: Do you know what this bird says? He replied: What does it say? He said: It says, your knowledge and Moses' knowledge out of all God's knowledge is like what my beak takes from this water."

Author's comment: The story of this bird appears in most of the oral traditions telling the story.

(4) *Tafsir al-ʿAyyāshī* says, on the authority of Hishām b. Sālim on the authority of Abū ʿAbdullāh:

"Moses was more knowledgeable than al-Khiḍr."

Abū Ḥamza says on the authority of Abū Jaʿfar, Moses' executor was Joshua b. Nūn. He was the servant mentioned in His book.

On the authority of ʿAbdullāh b. Maymūn al-Qaddāḥ on the authority of Abū ʿAbdullāh on the authority of his father: "While Moses was sitting among a crowd of Israelites a man said to him, I do not think that there is anyone who knows more about God than you do. Moses replied: I do not think so. God then revealed to him: On the contrary, My servant al-Khiḍr does. He then asked the way to get to him. He had the fish with him. When he lost it, it would be a sign. His affair was as God told in the story."

Author's comment: The differences in the oral traditions over who was more knowledgeable must be interpreted as a difference in the type of knowledge they each had.

(5) On the authority of Abū Baṣīr on the authority of Abū ʿAbdullāh (about the God's words), *and we feared*:

"It means he [al-Khidr] feared if the boy went on living he would invite his parents to disbelief and they would respond because of the excessive love they had for him."

(6) On the authority of ʿUthmān on the authority of a man on the authority of Abū ʿAbdullāh (about) God's words: *So we desired that their Lord might give them in his place one better than him in purity and more caring toward his kin*:

"They had a little girl who went on to have a little boy who went on to become a prophet."

Author's comment: Most oral traditions say that seventy prophets were born from her but what is meant is from her line.

(7) On the authority of Isḥāq b. ʿAmmār, I heard Abū ʿAbdullāh say: "Because of a man's righteousness, God makes his children and his children's children righteous. He will protect him in his house and in the houses around him and they will remain in God's protection because of his being precious to God. He then mentioned (about) the two boys, saying, *and their father was a righteous man*. Do you not see that God thanked them for their father's righteousness?"

(8) On the authority of Masʿada b. Ṣadaqa on the authority of Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad on the authority of his forefathers, The Prophet said: "God provides a legacy in a righteous servant's family and property after his death even if his family are evil people. He then recited this verse: . . . *and their father was a righteous man*, up to the end of the verse."

(9) *Al-Durr al-manthūr* says, Ibn Mardawayh cites on the authority of Jābir, God's Messenger said:
"Because of his righteousness, God makes a righteous man's children and his children's children and the houses around him righteous. They will remain in God's protection so long as he is among them."

Author's comment: Oral traditions to the same effect are *mustafīḍa* (many, almost to the point of being irrefutable).

(10) *Al-Kāfi* says, via its chain of narration, on the authority of Ṣafwān al-Jammāl, I asked Abū ʿAbdullāh about God's words, *And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them*. He replied:
"It was neither gold nor silver. Instead it was four statements: There is no god but God. Whoever is certain of death will not laugh. The heart of whoever is certain of the reckoning will not be joyful. Whoever is certain of ordainment (*al-qadar*) will fear no one else but God."

Author's comment: Many are the oral traditions narrated by both the Shiʿah and Sunnī to the effect that the treasure which was underneath the

wall was a tablet on which words were inscribed. Most of them say that it was a gold tablet. This is not contradicted by what this oral tradition says—it was neither gold nor silver—because what that means is neither dinars nor dirhams, which are what one immediately thinks of when one hears the word treasure.

The oral traditions differ on the exact words inscribed on the tablet. However, most of them agree that there was the declaration that there is no god but God and there was something written about death and ordainment.

Some of them include both declarations of faith, as in:

(11) *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority al-Bayhaqī's *Shuʿab al-īmān* on the authority of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib on God's words, *and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them*:

"It was a gold tablet on which was inscribed: There is no god but God. Muḥammad is the Messenger of God. It is amazing that anyone who remembers that death is true is joyful. It is amazing that anyone who remembers that hell is true laughs. It is amazing that anyone who remembers that ordainment is true, is sorrowful. It is amazing that anyone who sees the world and its disposal of the people in it, state after state, has confidence (*yuṭmʾin*) in it."

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Verses 83–102

Introduction & Commentary

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These verses tell the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn and contain one of the Qur'an's heroic tales.

وَيَسْـَٔلُونَكَ عَن ذِى ٱلْقَرْنَيْنِ ۖ قُلْ سَأَتْلُوا۟ عَلَيْكُم مِّنْهُ ذِكْرًا ﴿٨٣﴾

(18:83) ***And they ask you about Dhū l-Qarnayn. Say: I will recite to you an account*** **(dhikran)** ***of him.***

This means they ask about Dhū l-Qarnayn's exploits. The evidence of that is the answer to the question which describes his exploits, but do not acquaint us with his personal details. It even stops at mentioning him by his nickname without going on to state his real name.

Dhikr is either:

1) A verbal noun meaning the object (that is, *madhkūr*), rendering a meaning of, *Say: I will recite to you something worth mentioning* (shayʾan madhkūran) *about him,* that is, about Dhū l-Qarnayn; or,

2) It means the Qur'an—God called it *dhikr* in many places. Based on that interpretation, it would all mean, "Say: I will recite to you some Qur'an of him".

Minhu either means (something) about Dhū l-Qarnayn or, (something) from God.

It consists of what follows this verse from, *Surely We established him in the land*, right to the end of the story. The second interpretation (that is, that *dhikr* means some Qur'an) is more likely.

إِنَّا مَكَّنَّا لَهُۥ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَءَاتَيْنَـٰهُ مِن كُلِّ شَىْءٍ سَبَبًا ﴿٨٤﴾

(18:84) ***Surely We established*** **(makkanna)** ***him in the land and granted him means of access to everything.***

The word *tamkin* means facilitating. One can either say *makkantuhu* (I enabled him) or *makkantu lahu* (I facilitated for him). *Tamakkun* in

the land means the power to dispose of it as he wishes and wants through being made sovereign over it.

It may be claimed that it is derived from *makan* based on the mistaken belief that the (letter) *mim* is not one of the root letters. Based on this interpretation, *tamkīn* would mean giving stability and firmness such that it is not moved from its place by any competing impediment.

A *sabab* is a link and means. Thus granting him a *sabab* of everything means giving him some of everything he uses and benefits from, for example intellect, knowledge, religion, strength, body, abundance of money, soldiers, vastness of dominion, the (ability) to administrate well (*ḥusn al-tadbīr*) and so on to achieve important life goals. This is a blessing from Him bestowed upon Dhū l-Qarnayn and the great importance of his affair [is given] with the most eloquent explanation. What He says about his career, deeds, and utterances is full of wisdom and strength which is testimony to that.

فَأَتۡبَعَ سَبَبًا ﴿٨٥﴾

(18:85) *So he followed a course* (fa-atbaʿa sababan).

Itbāʿ means following a course and taking a path toward the place where the sun sets.

حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَغۡرِبَ ٱلشَّمۡسِ وَجَدَهَا تَغۡرُبُ فِي عَيۡنٍ حَمِئَةٖ وَوَجَدَ عِندَهَا قَوۡمٗاۗ قُلۡنَا يَٰذَا ٱلۡقَرۡنَيۡنِ إِمَّآ أَن تُعَذِّبَ وَإِمَّآ أَن تَتَّخِذَ فِيهِمۡ حُسۡنٗا ﴿٨٦﴾

(18:86) *Until* (ḥattā), *when he reached the place where the sun set, he found it going down into a black sea, and found by it a people. We said: O Dhū l-Qarnayn! you either give them a chastisement or do them a benefit.*

The word *ḥattā* indicates an implied verb, that is, So he traveled, *until, when he reached . . .* The phrase, *where the sun set*, means the western edge of civilization at that time as evidenced by what follows, *and found by it a people.*

People say that *ʿayn ḥamiʾa* means an sea of black mud and that *ʿayn*

means sea. Finding the sun setting in a black sea means a place at the sea shore beyond which there is no expectation of there being any more land. So he thought that the sun set in the sea because it was correct to say that it was the horizon. The description of this black sea applies to the Mediterranean. There are eternal islands in it which used to be sources of longevity but they subsequently sank.

An alternative recitation is *fi ʿaynin ḥāmiyya*, that is, a hot sea. That is true of the points in the Mediterranean close to the equator and near Africa. It may be that Dhū l-Qarnayn reached the shores of Africa on his journey to the west.

We said: O Dhū l-Qarnayn!: When the Qur'an says that He is saying something, it means revelation to a Prophet or communication via revelation, for example: *And We said: O Adam! Dwell you . . .* (2:35) *And when We said: Enter this city . . .* (2:58).

It is also used for inspiration other than to a prophet, for example: *And We revealed to Moses' mother, saying: Nurse him . . .* (28:7).

Thus, it is clear that the words, *We said: O Dhū l-Qarnayn!*, does not mean that he was a prophet who received revelation because God's speaking is not just restricted to revelation to a prophet.

It does not fail to give the impression that he was spoken to through the intermediary of a prophet who was with him. That would make his kingdom similar to that of Ṭālūt—one of the Israelites—who was advised and guided by their Prophet. The reason for this impression is that God is referred to in the third person.

The clause, *you either give them a chastisement or do them a benefit* (ḥasanan), means either punish those people or do something of benefit to them. *Ḥasanan* (benefit) is a verbal noun meant as the subject, taking the place of an implied noun which it describes. Alternatively, it is an adjective for emphasis. In the alternative, it is claimed that making *ittikhādh al-ḥasan* (doing them a benefit) the opposite of punishing suggests that it is preferable. It could be a declarative statement of two possibilities meant to indicate that both are permissible. Thus it is a declarative intended as a performative. What it would mean is: It is up to you whether you punish them or forgive them. However, what is likely is that it is interrogative—he is being asked what he is going to do: subjugate or forgive. This last alternative is the best because of the context of the answer which deals with punishment and doing good in different situations, *As to him who is*

unjust, we will chastise him . . . And as for him who believes and does good, he shall have goodly reward. If the clause, *you either give them a chastisement or do them a benefit*, is a choice between alternative obligations, then, *As for him who believes and does good*, would have been an endorsement of it and an announcement of acceptance, which is of little point.

In short, it means: "We asked him what he wanted to do to them—punish them or do them good—after defeating them and becoming their ruler. He replied: 'We will punish whoever of them is a wrongdoer and he will be returned to his Lord and He will punish him with an exemplary punishment. We will be good to pious believers and give them ease.'"

The object is not mentioned in, *immā an tuʿadhdhiba* (lit. either you punish) but it is in, *immā an tattakhidha fihim ḥusnan* (or you do them a benefit) because they were not all wrongdoers. It is not permissible to apply a punishment meant for people who deserve it to absolutely everyone but it is permissible to be good to the whole of a people among whom there are good and bad.

قَالَ أَمَّا مَن ظَلَمَ فَسَوْفَ نُعَذِّبُهُۥ ثُمَّ يُرَدُّ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهِۦ فَيُعَذِّبُهُۥ عَذَابًا نُّكْرًا ﴿٨٧﴾

(18:87) ***He said: As to him who is unjust, we will chastise him, then shall he be returned to his Lord, and He will chastise him with an exemplary*** **(nukran)** ***chastisement.***

The words *nukr* and *munkar* mean "unprecedented," that is, He will give them a punishment without precedent which they had not reckoned on and not expected. *Ẓulm* has been interpreted by some as "polytheism" and *taʿdhīb* as "killing." On the basis of this interpretation, the clause, *as to him who is unjust, we will chastise him*, would mean, as for him who is a polytheist and does not resile from polytheism, we will kill him. This is the case if "who is unjust" is being contrasted with "who believes and does good". However the likely reason for the contrast is that being unjust means all of the following: (1) polytheists; (2) those who do not believe in God at all; and (3) those who believe and do not attribute associates to Him but fail to do good, instead making mischief in the land.

If it had not been contrasted to believing, the likely meaning of *ẓulm* would have been making mischief without any regard to polytheism

because the customary practice of kings who were just was to cleanse their land of the mischief made by mischief-makers. Similarly, there is no evidence for chastisement only meaning killing.

وَأَمَّا مَنْ ءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَٰلِحًا فَلَهُۥ جَزَآءً ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۖ وَسَنَقُولُ لَهُۥ مِنْ أَمْرِنَا يُسْرًا ﴿٨٨﴾

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(18:88) ***And as for him who believes and does good*** **(ṣāliḥan),** ***he shall have goodly reward*** **(jazāʾan al-ḥusnā)** ***and We will speak to him an easy word*** **(yusran)** ***of Our command*** **(amrina).**

The word *ṣāliḥan* is an adjective which takes the place of an implied noun which it describes. The same is true of *al-ḥusnā*. *Jazāʾ* (reward) is:

(1) A circumstantial qualifier, with the implied meaning: and as for whoever believes and does good work he will have good reward (*al-mathūbat al-ḥusnā*) in the circumstance of its being a satisfactory performance of obligation (*ḥāl li-kawnihi mujziyan*); or

(2) Specifying complement, with the implied meaning: whoever believes and does good work he will have good in terms of reward (*min ḥayth al-jazāʾ*); or

(3) Absolute object, with the implied meaning: We will reward him a reward (*nujzihi jazāʾan*) (that is, We will reward him greatly).

And We will speak to him an easy word (yusran) *of Our command* (amrina)*:* The word *yusr* means that which is easy (*maysūr*). It is an adjective which takes the place of an implied noun which it describes. The likely meaning of *amr* is a command pertaining to obligations (*amr taklifi*). The implied meaning is: "We will say an easy word of Our command to him, that is, We will give him an obligation which is easy for him and not difficult for him."

ثُمَّ أَتْبَعَ سَبَبًا ﴿٨٩﴾ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ مَطْلِعَ ٱلشَّمْسِ وَجَدَهَا تَطْلُعُ عَلَىٰ قَوْمٍ لَّمْ نَجْعَل لَّهُم مِّن دُونِهَا سِتْرًا ﴿٩٠﴾

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(18:89–90) ***Then he followed (another) course. Until, when he reached the land of the rising of the sun, he found it rising on a people to whom We had given no shelter from it;***

That is, then he prepared a means to travel and then traveled toward the eastern horizon until he reached the desert to the east. He then found the sun rising over a nomadic people for whom We had provided no protection from the sun.

Satr, means protection from the sun. It can either be buildings and clothing or buildings only, that is, they lived on the land without having any houses to take refuge in or to protect themselves from the sun. They were also naked, without any clothing. Attributing that to God in the clause, *to whom We had given no shelter from it*, is an allusion to the fact that they had not yet averted to it, not learned how to build houses, put up tents or weave and sew clothes.

كَذَٰلِكَ ۖ وَقَدْ أَحَطْنَا بِمَا لَدَيْهِ خُبْرًا ﴿٩١﴾

(18:91) ***Even so!*** **(kadhalika)** ***and We had a full knowledge of what he had.***

The likely meaning of *kadhalika* (even so) is an allusion to the description just given of them. Comparing something to itself—based on the opinion that in a comparison the thing compared should be different to what it is compared with—renders a somewhat emphatic meaning. There are alternative suggestions for what the demonstrative pronoun "that" (*dhalika*) in *kadhalika* (lit. like that) refers to, but they are very different from what is ordinarily understood.

And We had a full knowledge of what he had: The pronoun ("he") refers to Dhū l-Qarnayn. The sentence (grammatically speaking) is circumstantial. What it means is he adopted a means of travel, reached where the sun rises, and found such and such a people in a state, full knowledge of which We have. We know all the provision he has, what he will make happen, and what happens to him. It is likely that having full knowledge of what he had is an allusion to Dhū l-Qarnayn's choice and that he acted through God's guidance and commandment. He would only come or go out as guided or ordered—as alluded to what was said about his journey to where the sun sets, *We said, O Dhū l-Qarnayn! . . .*

The verse, that is, *and We had a full knowledge . . .*, in its allusory meaning is similar to: *And make the ark before Our eyes and (according to) Our revelation . . .* (11:37), *. . . He has revealed it with His knowledge . . .* (4:166), and *. . . and He encompasses what is with them . . .* (72:28).

It is also said [that the verse means], (1) To state the greatness of his affair and that God alone has full knowledge of the particulars and minutiae; (2) to embellish what Dhū l-Qarnayn suffered on this journey. The difficulties and hardships he endured are within God's knowledge and do not elude Him, or (3) to state the greatness of the course he took. However, the explanation we gave above is better.

ثُمَّ أَتۡبَعَ سَبَبًا ﴿٩٢﴾ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا بَلَغَ بَيۡنَ ٱلسَّدَّيۡنِ وَجَدَ مِن دُونِهِمَا قَوۡمًا لَّا يَكَادُونَ يَفۡقَهُونَ قَوۡلًا ﴿٩٣﴾

(18:92–93) ***Then he followed (another) course. Until, when he reached (a place) between the two mountains, he found on that side of them a people who could hardly understand a word.***

The word *sadd* means mountain or any other obstruction blocking the way. Thus *al-saddayn* means two mountains.

He found on that side of them a people, that is, close to the two mountains.

The clause, *who could hardly understand a word*, is an allusion to their simpleness and the superficiality of their understanding. It may be said that it is an allusion to the strangeness of their language and its remoteness from all the languages known to them. That is not an unlikely explanation.

قَالُواْ يَٰذَا ٱلۡقَرۡنَيۡنِ إِنَّ يَأۡجُوجَ وَمَأۡجُوجَ مُفۡسِدُونَ فِي ٱلۡأَرۡضِ فَهَلۡ نَجۡعَلُ لَكَ خَرۡجًا عَلَىٰٓ أَن تَجۡعَلَ بَيۡنَنَا وَبَيۡنَهُمۡ سَدًّا ﴿٩٤﴾

(18:94) ***They said: O Dhū l-Qarnayn! surely Gog and Magog make mischief in the land. Shall we then pay you a tribute on condition that you should raise a barrier between us and them.***

It is likely that those who said this were the people he found between the two mountains. Gog and Magog were two generations of people who came from behind the two mountains and raided them, killing, wounding or pillaging them all. The context provides proof of that because the pronoun used to refer to them is exclusive to rational beings, the barrier was erected between the two mountains and so on.

Shall we then pay you a tribute (kharajan) . . . : The word *kharaj* means what is taken from one's money to spend on things one needs. They made

him an offer to give him money in exchange for his erecting a barrier between them and Gog and Magog, to stop them from crossing the barrier and transgressing against them.

قَالَ مَا مَكَّنِّي فِيهِ رَبِّي خَيْرٌ فَأَعِينُونِي بِقُوَّةٍ أَجْعَلْ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَهُمْ رَدْمًا ﴿٩٥﴾

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(18:95) ***He said: That in which my Lord has established me* (makkanni)** ***is better, therefore you only help me with strength/ workers, I will make a fortified barrier between you and them.***

The basis of *makkannī* (established me) is *makkananī* but one of the *nūn*s has been blended into the other. A *radm* is a barrier. Alternatively, it is said that it is a strong barrier. Based on this interpretation, his saying in response to their request for a *sadd* (barrier) meant giving them what they wanted and promising what was more than what they needed and expected.

Dhū l-Qarnayn had no need for the tribute they offered him in exchange for his erecting a barrier. He says: "The abundance and strength in which my Lord has established me and settled on me is better than the money you promise me so I have no need for it."

Therefore you only help me with strength (quwwa): The word *quwwa* means that through which one has the power to do something. The phrase follows logically from what came of their suggestion to him—their request from him to build them a barrier. In short, it means—as for tribute, I have no need for it, but as for the wall, if you want, help me with what will enable me to build it, for example men and building materials—the examples mentioned were blocks of iron, molten brass, and blowing in the bellows. I will build you a strong barrier.

Thus, it is clear that what they meant by their offer to him of *kharaj* was the wage for making the barrier.

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ءَاتُونِي زُبَرَ ٱلْحَدِيدِ ۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا سَاوَىٰ بَيْنَ ٱلصَّدَفَيْنِ قَالَ ٱنفُخُوا۟ ۖ حَتَّىٰٓ إِذَا جَعَلَهُۥ نَارًا قَالَ ءَاتُونِيٓ أُفْرِغْ عَلَيْهِ قِطْرًا ﴿٩٦﴾

(18:96) ***Bring me blocks of iron; until, when he had filled up the space between the two mountain sides, he said: Blow, until, when***

he had made it (as) fire, he said: Bring me molten brass which I may pour over it.

The word *zubar* is the plural of *zubra* just as *ghuraf* (rooms) is the plural of *ghurfa* (room). *Zubra* means block. It is said that *sāwa* means the same as *sawwa* (to make two things level). In fact *sawwa* is an alternative recitation. *Al-ṣadafayn* is the dual form of *ṣadaf* which is one of the two sides of a mountain. Some say that it can only be said if there is another mountain next to it and parallel to it. It is one of those nouns that only come as part of a pair, for example *zawj* (spouse or one of a pair), *ḍiʿf* (half), etc. *Qiṭr* means copper or molten brass. *Ifrāgh* means pouring it onto the holes, flaws and gaps.

Atūnī zubar al-ḥadīd means "bring me blocks of iron" so that I can use them in the barrier. It is part of the *quwwa* (strength) he asked them for. He may have singled it out for mention and not mentioned stone or any other building materials because it is the main ingredient in building a strong barrier. The phrase, *atūni zubar al-ḥadīd* (bring me blocks of iron), is substitution of the specific for the general *fa aʿinuni bi quwwatin* (therefore you only help me with strength/might) or it implies, "He said . . ." This (style) appears frequently in the Qur'an.

Until, when he had filled up the space between the two mountain sides, he said: Blow . . . (Ḥattā idhā sāwā bayn al-ṣadafayni qāla anfukhū)*:* There is brevity in these words through the use of omission and implication. They assisted him with might and brought him what he asked of them so he built them a barrier and erected it

The clause, *he said: Blow*, is likely that it is an instance of not wanting to mention the dependent object of the verb because it indicates the verb itself. What it means is placing the nozzles of the bellows on the barrier to heat up the iron in it and pour the molten brass onto the cracks and gaps.

Until, when he had made it (as) fire. . .: Again implication and brevity are employed. The implied meaning is: "Then he blew until, when he had made it—that is, what he blew the bellows onto, or the iron—fire, or like fire in terms of its appearance or temperature." This is an example of metaphorical borrowing (*istiʿāra*).

He [Dhū l-Qarnayn] said: Bring me molten brass which I may pour over it: This means: "Bring me molten brass which I may empty and pour onto it to block the cracks and make the barrier solid, through which nothing can penetrate."

فَمَا ٱسۡطَٰعُوٓاْ أَن يَظۡهَرُوهُ وَمَا ٱسۡتَطَٰعُواْ لَهُۥ نَقۡبٗا ٩٧

(18:97) ***So they were not able*** **(fa mā ṣṭāʿū)** ***to scale it*** **(yaẓharūhu)** ***nor could they*** **(wa mā staṭāʿū)** ***make a hole*** **(naqban)** ***in it.***

The words *iṣṭāʿū* and *istaṭāʿū* mean the same thing (they are able, negated with *mā* in the Arabic). *Ẓuhūr* means being up high and climbing up high. *Naqb* means the same as *thaqb*, that is, hole. However, al-Rāghib explains in *al-Mufradat fī gharīb al-Qurʾān* that a hole in a wall or a skin is called a *naqb* while a hole in wood is called a *thaqb*. The plural pronouns refer to Gog and Magog.

There is implication and brevity in these words. The implied meaning is: Then he built a barrier and Gog and Magog were unable to climb it because it was so high or make a hole in it because it was so strong.

قَالَ هَٰذَا رَحۡمَةٞ مِّن رَّبِّيۖ فَإِذَا جَآءَ وَعۡدُ رَبِّي جَعَلَهُۥ دَكَّآءَۖ وَكَانَ وَعۡدُ رَبِّي حَقّٗا ٩٨

(18:98) ***He said: This is a mercy from my Lord, but when the promise of my Lord comes to pass He will make it level with the ground, and the promise of my Lord is ever true.***

The word *dakkāʾ* means the same as *dakk* which is the most severe beating. It is a verbal noun (literally meaning beating flat) but it can be used to mean the same as the object of the verb (that is, beaten flat). Alternatively, it is claimed that it means *al-nāqa al-dakkāʾ*, that is, a camel which has no hump. Based on this interpretation, it is an example of metaphorical borrowing (*istiʿāra*). What it means is destruction of the barrier—so people say.

He said: This is a mercy from my Lord, that is, Dhū l-Qarnayn said after building the barrier: "This (the barrier) is a mercy from my Lord, that is, a mercy and protection by which the evil of Gog and Magog are held back from nations of people."

In the words, *but when the promise of my Lord comes to pass He will make it level with the ground*, there is omission and implication. The implication is: "This mercy will remain until my Lord's promise comes. When my Lord's promise comes He will make it flat—level with the ground."

The promise means either a promise from Him specific to the barrier—that it will be flattened close to the Hour, making this is an apocalyptic future prediction related by Dhū l-Qarnayn—or His general promise of the coming of the Hour, which will flatten mountains and destroy the world. He emphasizes what he says with (the words), *and the promise of my Lord is ever true.*

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وَتَرَكۡنَا بَعۡضَهُمۡ يَوۡمَئِذٖ يَمُوجُ فِي بَعۡضٖۖ وَنُفِخَ فِي ٱلصُّورِ فَجَمَعۡنَٰهُمۡ جَمۡعٗا ٩٩

(18:99) ***And on that day We will leave a part of them in conflict with another part, and the trumpet will be blown, so We will gather them all together;***

It is apparent from the context that the plural pronoun refers to the people. This is supported by the fact that the pronoun "*them*" in, *We will gather them*, definitely refers to the people because with plurals, what applies to one instance applies to all.

And on that day We will leave a part of them in conflict (yamūju) *with another part:* This is metaphorical borrowing.[1] It means that on that day, they will be beaten around by the severity of the terror like the swelling of the sea, being pushed against each other. They will lose their order, and disorder and chaos will rule. Their Lord will turn away from them, His mercy will not encompass them and their affair will not be put right by His care.

It is as if the verse fills in the blanks of the clause, *but when the promise of my Lord comes to pass He will make it level with the ground*. It is similar to His words elsewhere: *Even when Gog and Magog are let loose and they shall break forth from every elevated place. And the true promise shall draw nigh, then lo! the eyes of those who disbelieved shall be fixedly open: O woe to us! surely we were in a state of heedlessness as to this; nay, we were unjust* (21:96–97).

In any event, the verse is a prediction of a future apocalyptic event.

It has become clear from the above that the word, *tark* (We will leave) in the verse means what one immediately thinks it does—the opposite of

1 *Yamūju* means it—that is, the sea—heaves. (Trans.)

taking. There is no need for what some people have said, that is, that *tark* actually means making (*jaʿl*), which is one of its antonyms.

The verse constitutes God's words and is not the end of what Dhū l-Qarnayn said. The proof of that is the shift from the third person to the first person [plural of majesty] addressing another—the same as earlier on, in the clauses, *Surely **We** established him*, and, *We said: O Dhū l-Qarnayn*. If it had been the end of what Dhū l-Qarnayn said, it would have read, "He will leave" in line with, ***He** will make it level with the ground.*

And the trumpet will be blown: This is the second blow—which resurrects—as evidenced by words, *so We will gather them all together; and the next verse, And We will bring forth hell, exposed to view, on that day before the unbelievers.*

ٱلَّذِينَ كَانَتۡ أَعۡيُنُهُمۡ فِي غِطَآءٍ عَن ذِكۡرِي وَكَانُواْ لَا يَسۡتَطِيعُونَ سَمۡعًا ١٠١

(18:101) ***Those whose eyes were under a cover from My reminder and they could not even hear.***

This explains who are meant by the unbelievers. It is between them and remembrance of Himself that God put up a barrier. That is why it is appropriate to talk about their condition after mentioning Gog and Magog. So He put their eyes under a cover from remembrance of Him and took away the power of hearing from their ears. Thus the way between them and the truth—remembrance of God—has been taken away.

The truth can only be reached with one's sight by looking at God's words and being guided by them to what they indicate and guide toward, or with one's hearing through listening to the wisdom, warning, stories, and lessons. Those people have no sight or hearing.

أَفَحَسِبَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوٓاْ أَن يَتَّخِذُواْ عِبَادِي مِن دُونِيٓ أَوۡلِيَآءَۚ إِنَّآ أَعۡتَدۡنَا جَهَنَّمَ لِلۡكَٰفِرِينَ نُزُلًا ١٠٢

(18:102) ***What! do then those who disbelieve think that they can take My servants to be guardians instead of Me? Surely We have prepared hell for the entertainment of the unbelievers.***

The question is rhetorical. *Majmaʿ al-bayān* says it means:

"Do those who reject belief in the Oneness of God think that they

> can take lords instead of Me to help them and stop My punishment from reaching them?"

This implied meaning is evidenced by (the sentence), *Surely We have prepared hell for the entertainment of the unbelievers.*

There is a second explanation narrated on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās, namely that it means:

> "What! Do then those who disbelieve think that they can take gods instead of Me and that I will not get angry for My own sake and not punish them?"

A third explanation is that the clause, *that they can take*, is the first object of *ḥasiba* which means think. Its second object is implied. The implied meaning is:

> "What! Do then those who disbelieve think that their taking servants as guardians instead of Me will be of any avail to them and stop them from being punished."

The difference between this explanation and the two previous ones is that in the two previous explanations, *an* ("that") and its relative phrase take the place of two objects. What is implied is part of the relative phrase. In contrast, according to this third explanation, *an* ("that") and its relative phrase is only the first object. The second object is implied.

A fourth explanation is that *an* ("that") and its relative phrase take the place of the two objects. The purpose of these words is to deny their *ittikhādh* (taking) being true *ittikhādh*, meaning that it is not *ittikhādh* at all. This is because *ittikhādh* can only be mutual, that is, both parties taking each other. Those taken disassociate themselves from them because they say: *They shall say: Glory be to You! You are our Guardian, not they . . .* (34:41).

The four explanations are in descending order of merit, that is, the first one is the best and is supported by the context provided by the verses. These verses and indeed all the verses in the chapter are there to explain that people have been seduced by the embellishment of life in this world. They have become confused and rely on ostensible causes and take others as guardians instead of God. They think that their guardianship will suffice them, avail them, and keep harm at bay. The truth is that what they will encounter after the trumpet is blown and they are gathered contradicts that because the verse denounces what they think and believe after that had been their inclination. Next, the need to infer a second implied

object is eliminated because the permissibility of *an* ("that") and its relative phrase take the place of the two objects of *ḥasiba*, having done so in many other places, for example: *Nay! do those who have wrought evil deeds think* (ḥasiba) *that We will make them like those who believe* . . . (45:21).

This is in spite of the fact that some grammarians have said that it is not allowed.

The chosen interpretation is supported by the subsequent verses, *Say: Shall We inform you of the greatest losers in (their) deeds?* Similarly, it is supported by the recitation attributed to ʿAlī and several others, *a fa ḥasbu*, meaning: "What! Is taking My servants as guardians instead of Me enough for them?"

The (plural) word "servants" in the sentence, *that they can take My servants to be guardians instead of Me*, is any of the angels, jinn, and perfect humans worshiped by idolaters.

Some exegetes say that what is meant by them is the Messiah, the angels, and other favored ones like them, but not *shayṭān*s because the annexation in this word *ʿibādi* (My servants) is mainly used to honor that which is annexed.

Author's reply:

1) The context does not suit honoring, as is obvious.

2) Second, the qualifier *min dūni* (instead of me) explicitly indicates that "those who disbelieve" means the idolaters who do not worship God in spite of acknowledging His divinity, instead they only worship intercessor associates. As for the People of the Book, for example, Christians take the Messiah as a guardian but they do not deny God's guardianship. On the contrary, they attest to both guardianship and then worship them both as one. This is something the reader should understand. Thus, the fact is that *ʿibādī* (My servants) does not include the Messiah and humans like him. Rather, it is exclusive to the idolaters' gods. "Those who disbelieve" means the idolaters alone.

Surely We have prepared hell for the entertainment of the unbelievers, that is, something they enjoy when they first arrive in the hereafter. The hereafter is likened to a home where a guest stays. Hell is likened to entertainment with which a guest is honored when he first arrives. That which comes after two verses adds to the subtlety and beauty of this analogy—that no weight will be assigned to them on the Day of Resurrection. It is as if they will enter hell immediately. There is obvious scorn in the

verse. It is as if it was brought on by the way they scorned [God] in this world, as in the verse, . . . *and they mocked My Signs and My messengers*.

Examining Narrations

Tafsīr al-Qummī says:

> "When God's Messenger related the account of Moses, his servant, and al-Khiḍr, the people asked him: Tell us about a traveler who traveled the world, east and west. Who was he? What was his story? Thereafter, God revealed, *And they ask you about Dhū l-Qarnayn . . .*"

Author's comment: The details of this oral tradition came up in the discussion on the story of the Companions of the Cave. Something to the same effect is also narrated in *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥatim on the authority of al-Suddī and on the authority of ʿUmar—Ghufra's freeman. The reader should realize that there is amazing discrepancy, contradiction, and incoherence in all the particulars of the story and in all the aspects of the oral traditions about the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn, narrated by both the Shīʿah and the Sunnī on the authority of the Prophet and, by the Shīʿah on the authority of the People of the Household, and, similarly the sayings narrated on the authority of the Companions and successors and treated like sacred hadith by the Sunnī. Furthermore, they contain odd things which a sound intellect shies away from, the mind thinks are impossible, and which the real world refutes. A critical researcher would not doubt if he compared them with each other and reflected on them that they are not free of interpolation, fabrication, and astonishing exaggerations in the story's description. The strangest of them are those narrated on the authority of Jewish scholars who became Muslims, such as Wahb b. Munabbih, Kaʿb al-Aḥbar or those stories within which are clues which give the impression that they are taken from them—so these are of no help to us. They have been narrated wholesale, numerous and long as they are. We shall refer only briefly to some of the ways in which they differ and suffice ourselves with narrating what is mostly free of discrepancy.

One of the differences between them is over his personage. Most of them say that he was human. Others[1] say that he was an angel from

1 *al-Durr al-manthūr* narrates on the authority of al-Aḥwaṣ b. Ḥakīm on the authority of his father on the authority of the Prophet and on the authority

heaven whom God sent down to earth "and granted means of access to everything". Al-Maqrīzī's *Khiṭaṭ* says, on the authority of al-Jāḥiẓ's *Kitāb al-ḥayawan* [The book of animals], that Dhū l-Qarnayn's mother was human but his father was an angel.

Another of the differences is over his characteristics. Most narrations say that he was a pious servant who loved God, so God loved him and advised him and so he in turn dedicated himself sincerely to Him. Some[1] say that he was a *muḥaddath* whom the angel came to and spoke to (*yuḥaddithuhu*). Others[2] say that he was a prophet.

Another of the differences is over his name. Some[3] say that his name was ʿAyyāsh, some[4] say Iskandar, some[5] say Marziyā b. Marzaba al-Yūnāni (the Greek) of the progeny of Yūnan son of Yāfith son of Noah, some[6] Muṣʿab b. ʿAbdullāh of Qaḥṭān, some[7] say Ṣaʿb b. Dhī l-Marāthid, the first

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of al-Shirāzī on the authority of Jubayr b. Nufayr on the authority of the Prophet and on the authority of several narrators on the authority of Khālid b. Maʿdān on the authority of the Prophet and on the authority of several narrators on the authority of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.

1 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Abū Shaykh on the authority of al-Bāqir; *al-Burhān* on the authority of Jibrāʾil b. Aḥmad on the authority of al-Aṣbagh b. Nubāta on the authority of ʿAlī, and, *Nūr al-thaqalayn* says on the authority of *Uṣūl al-kāfī* on the authority of al-Ḥārith b. al-Mughīra on the authority of Abū Jaʿfar.

2 Narrated by al-ʿAyyāshī on the authority of Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī on the authority of Abū Jaʿfar; *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Abū l-Shaykh on the authority of Abū l-Warqāʾ on the authority of ʿAlī; there are other narrations to the same effect.

3 As in *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* on the authority of al-Aṣbagh b. Nubāta on the authority of ʿAlī; *al-Burhān* on the authority of al-Thumālī on the authority of al-Bāqir

4 As is apparent from a narration in al-Ḥimyarī's *Qurb al-isnād* on the authority of al-Kāẓim and *al-Durr al-manthūr's* narration on the authority of several narrators on the authority of ʿUqbah ibn ʿ Āmir on the authority of the Prophet and also his narration on the authority of several narrators on the authority of Wahb.

5 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn al-Mundhir, Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Abū l-Shaykh via Ibn Isḥāq on the authority of one of the People of the Book who became Muslim.

6 *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*.

7 *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* on the authority of *al-Tījān* by Ibn Hishām.

of the Tubbaʿ as if he was al-Tubbaʿ Abū Karb and some[1] say ʿAbdullāh b. Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muʿid. Many other possible names are suggested.

Another example is the reason he was called Dhū l-Qarnayn. Some[2] say that he invited his people to God but they hit him on the right side (*qarn*) of his head and so he went away from them for a while. He then came back to them and invited them to God again, but they hit him on the left side (*qarn*) of his head. He then went away from them for a while. Then God gave him the means. Thereafter, he traveled the east and west of the earth. That is why he became known as Dhū l-Qarnayn. Some[3] say that they killed him with the first blow. God then resurrected him. He invited them but they hit him and killed him again. God then resurrected him and raised him to the lowest heaven. He then sent him down to earth and granted him ease of access to everything.

Some[4] say that after the second time he was resurrected, two horns grew where the two wounds were. God put light and darkness at his disposal. Then, when he came down to earth, he traveled and invited to God. He would roar like a lion and his horns would flash up and thunder. If any people were too arrogant for his invitation, he would impose darkness on them until they were forced to respond.

Some[5] say that he had two horns on his head and he would wind a turban over them, hiding them with it. He was the first to wear a turban. He hid the horns from the people and no one apart from his scribe saw them. He told the scribe not to tell anyone but it became too much for

1 *al-Khiṣāl* on the authority of Muḥammad b. Khālid without citing the chain of narration; *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* on the authority of Zubayr b. Bakkār on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

2 *al-Burhān* on the authority of al-Ṣadūq on the authority of al-Aṣbagh on the authority of ʿAlī; *Tafsīr al-Qummī* on the authority of Abū Baṣīr on the authority of al-Ṣadiq; *al-Khiṣāl* on the authority of Abū Baṣīr on the authority of al-Ṣādiq.

3 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* on the authority al-Aṣbagh on the authority of ʿAlī; *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Mardawayh via Abū Ṭufayl on the authority of ʿAlī; also narrated by al-ʿAyyāshī and other oral traditions.

4 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* on the authority of al-Aṣbagh on the authority of ʿAlī; *al-Durr al-manthūr* says something to the same effect on the authority of several narrators on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih.

5 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Abū l-Shaykh on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih. [. . .].

the scribe so he went out to the desert and put his mouth on the ground. He then called out, "Why the king has two horns!" Thereafter God made two pieces of cane grow from his words. A shepherd passed by them and he liked them so he cut them and took them as a *mizmār*.[1] When he blew it, "Why the king has two horns," would come out of the two pieces of cane. It then spread around the city and so (Dhū l-Qarnayn) sent for the scribe and tried to make him talk and threatened to kill him if he did not tell the truth. Thereafter, he told him the story and Dhū l-Qarnayn said: This is a matter which God wanted to become public. He then took his turban off his head.

Alternatively, it is claimed[2] that he became known as Dhū l-Qarnayn (having two horns) because he was king of two of the earth's horns (*qarnayan*)—the east and the west. It is also said[3] that he saw himself taking the two horns of the sun (*qarnay al-shams*) in a dream. The dream was interpreted to him as becoming king of the east and the west and he became known as Dhū l-Qarnayn. Alternatively, it is claimed[4] that it was because he had two braids in his hair. It is claimed[5] that it is because he was the king of Byzantium and Persia. Alternatively, it is claimed[6] that it is because he had what looked like two horns on his head. It is claimed[7] that it was because he had two golden horns on his crown. There are other explanations.

Another example of the differences [relate to] his journey to the west and the east. The greatest discrepancy is over this. It is narrated[8] that the clouds were put at his disposal and so he would ride the clouds and travel to the west and east of the earth. It is narrated[9] that he reached Mount

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1 That is, a musical instrument similar to a clarinet or oboe. (Trans.)

2 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of several narrators on the authority of Abū al-ʿĀliya and Ibn Shihāb.

3 *Nūr al-thaqalayn* on the authority of *al-Kharāʾij wa-l-Jarāʾiḥ* on the authority of al-ʿAskarī on the authority of ʿAlī.

4 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of al-Shīrāzī on the authority of Qatāda.

5 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of several narrators on the authority of Wahb.

6 Ibid.

7 Narrated in *Rūḥ al-maʿānī*.

8 Said by several of the Sunnī (*ʿāmma*) and Shiʿah (*khāṣṣa*), appearing in *al-Durr al-manthūr*, *al-Burhān*, *Nūr al-thaqalayn* and *Biḥār al-anwār*.

9 *al-Burhān* on the authority of Jamīl on the authority of al-Ṣādiq; *al-Durr*

Qāf, which is the green mountain surrounding the earth from which the sky's green color comes.[1]

It is narrated[2] that he sought the spring of life and was given directions to it into the darkness. He entered the darkness. Al-Khiḍr was in his vanguard. Dhū l-Qarnayn was not blessed with drinking from it but al-Khiḍr drank and bathed in water from it. He was then granted everlasting life. These narrations say that the darkness was to the east.

Another example of the discrepancy is over the position of the barrier which he built. Some[3] say that it is in the east, whereas others[4] say that it is in the north. Some narrations exaggerated so much as to say[5] that the length of the barrier, that is, between the two mountains, was a hundred *farsakh*s,[6] its width was fifty *farsakh*s and its height was the height of the two mountains. He dug a foundation for it until he reached water and made rock its filling and copper its clay. He then raised it high with blocks of iron and molten brass and made yellow copper veins along it and so it became like a stained garment (*burd*).

Another example of differences [relate to] the description of Gog and Magog. It is narrated[7] that they are Turks of the progeny of Yāfith son of

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al-manthūr on the authority of ʿAbd b. Ḥamīd and others on the authority of ʿIkrima.

1 In Muslim cosmology, Mount Qāf is the name of the mountain range that surrounds the terrestrial world; some classical Muslim scholars have described it as being made of green emerald, which is then reflected in the sky (*Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs [Leiden: Brill, 1960–2004], 4:400–402). (Ed.)

2 *Tafsīr al-Qummī* on the authority of ʿAlī; *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* on the authority of Hishām on the authority of someone from the family of Muḥammad; *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim and others on the authority of al-Bāqir.

3 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Isḥāq and others on the authority of Wahb.

4 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn al-Mundhir on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

5 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Isḥāq and others on the authority of Wahb.

6 A *farsakh* is approximately 5.5 kilometers. (Trans.)

7 *al-Durr al-manthūr*, on the authority of Ibn al-Mundhir on the authority of

Noah who made mischief in the land so a barrier was put up against them. Alternatively, it is narrated[1] that they are not of the children of Adam. A number[2] of narrations say that they are a proliferous people, not one of their males or females dies before he (or she) had begotten a thousand children, and that they are more numerous than the rest of humanity, to the point that some[3] narrations say that they are nine times more numerous than the rest of mankind. It is narrated[4] that they are so cruel and fierce that they do not pass by a single farm animal, predator or person without attacking and eating him, her or it, a single crop or tree without grazing it or body of water without drinking it and drying it up. It is narrated[5] that they are two peoples, each of whom is made up of four hundred thousand people, each nation so numerous that they can only be counted by God.

It is narrated[6] that there are three groups of them. One group of them is like rice—tall trees. The width of the second group is the same as their height—four arm spans by four arm spans. The third group is the toughest of them. They have two ears and use one to lay down on and the other as

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ᶜAlī and on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim on the authority of Qatāda; *Nūr al-thaqalayn* citing *ᶜIlal al-Sharāʾiᶜ* on the authority of al-ᶜAskarī.

1 *Nūr al-thaqalayn* citing *Rawḍāt al-kāfī* on the authority of Ibn ᶜAbbās.

2 al-Ṭabarī on the authority of ᶜAbdullāh b. ᶜUmayr and ᶜAbdullāh b. Salām; *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of al-Nisāʾī; Ibn Mardawayh on the authority of Aws on the authority of the Prophet; ibid. on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim on the authority of al-Suddī on the authority of ᶜAlī.

3 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of ᶜAbd al-Razzāq and others on the authority of ᶜAbdullāh b. ᶜUmar.

4 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Isḥāq and others on the authority of Wahb.

5 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn al-Mundhir and Abū l-Shaykh on the authority of Ḥassān b. ᶜAṭiyya; also on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim and others; on the authority of Ḥudhayfah on the authority of the Prophet; some oral traditions exaggerate their numbers so much that it is narrated on the authority of the Prophet that Gog and Magog are nine times as numerous as the Muslims (*al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* citing the authentic tradition on the authority of Abū Saᶜīd on the authority of the Prophet). It is said that the Muslims make up a fifth of the inhabitants of the earth which would make Gog and Magog two hundred times as numerous as all the inhabitants of the earth.

6 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn al-Mundhir and Ibn Abī Ḥātim on the authority of Kaᶜb al-Aḥbār.

a blanket. The outside and inside of one of their ears is covered in fur to keep them warm while the outside and inside of the other one is covered in down to keep them cool in summer. They have hair straight all over their bodies, concealing them. It is narrated that one[1] of them measures one, two or three handspans. It is further narrated[2] that the ones who fought them have faces like dogs.

Another discrepancy is over the time of Dhū l-Qarnayn's reign. Some[3] say that it was after Noah (Nūḥ). It is narrated[4] that it was during the time of and contemporary with Abraham. He went on hajj to the House [Kaʿba], met him and shook his hand. It was the first handshake on the face of the earth. Alternatively, it is narrated[5] that it was during the time of David.

Another difference is over the length of his reign. Some narrate[6] thirty years, others[7] twelve years. There are other discrepancies which anyone who refers to the oral traditions telling the story in hadith collections will come across—especially *al-Durr al-manthūr*, *Biḥār al-anwar*, *al-Burhān*, and *Nūr al-thaqalayn*.

Kamāl al-Dīn says via its chain of narration on the authority of al-Aṣbagh b. Nubāta:

> "Ibn al-Kawwāʾ came near ʿAlī's face while he was on the pulpit and said: Commander of the Faithful, tell me about Dhū l-Qarnayn. Was he a prophet or an angel (*malak*)? Tell me about his horns. Were they made of gold or silver? He replied: He was neither a prophet nor an angel. His horns were neither gold nor silver. However, he was a servant who loved God and whom God

1 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn al-Mundhir, al-Ḥākim and others on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās.

2 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of several narrators on the authority of ʿUqba b. ʿĀmir on the authority of the Prophet.

3 *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* on the authority of al-Aṣbagh on the authority of ʿAlī.

4 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Mardawayh and others on the authority of ʿUbayd b. ʿUmayr; *Nūr al-thaqalayn* on the authority of al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī: *al-Amālī* on the authority of al-Bāqir; Ibn Isḥāq: *al-ʿArāʾis*.

5 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Abū Ḥātim and Ibn ʿAsākir on the authority of Mujāhid.

6 *al-Burhān* on the authority of al-Birqī on the authority of Mūsā b. Jaʿfar.

7 *al-Durr al-manthūr* on the authority of Ibn Abī Ḥātim on the authority of Wahb.

loved. He sincerely helped God so God helped him. He was only known as Dhū l-Qarnayn because he invited his people to God, but they hit him on the side of his head. Thereafter he went away from them for a while, then came back to them. They then hit him on the other side of his head. There is among you the like of him."

Author's comment: It is likely that the narration says angel (*malak*) and not king (*malik*) because of the plethora (*istifāḍa*) of oral traditions on his authority and on the authority of another about Dhū l-Qarnayn's being an angel. Thus, his denial of Dhū l-Qarnayn's being a prophet or angel (*malak*) was a denial by him of the authenticity of what had been narrated on the authority of the Prophet in some oral traditions—that he was one of the angels. ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb used to say that, as mentioned above.

"There is among you the like of him"—that is, the like of Dhū l-Qarnayn with regard to his two head wounds—is an allusion to himself because he was struck by ʿAmr b. ʿAbd Widd and by ʿAbd al-Raḥman b. al-Muljam and was martyred as a result of that. It is a narration reported by numerous sources—but not quite enough to be irrefutable—in various wordings on his authority both by the Shīʿah and the Sunnī. The simplest worded is the one cited. The narrator's hand has tampered with the meaning, making it appear in amazing forms and it is therefore corrupt.

Al-Durr al-manthūr says, Ibn Mardawayh cites on the authority of Sālim b. Abī l-Jaʿd that ʿAlī was asked whether Dhū l-Qarnayn was a prophet. He replied: "I heard your Prophet say: He was a servant who sincerely helped God, so He helped him."

Al-Iḥtijāj by al-Ṭabrasī says, within a long hadith on the authority of al-Ṣādiq, the person asking the question said: Tell me where the sun sets. He replied: "One of the scholars has said: When it descends to the bottom of the dome, the orbit takes it round to the belly of heaven, perpetually rising until it sinks to where it rises, that is, it sets in a black sea, then breaks through the earth on the way back to where it rises and is confused under the Throne until it is granted permission to rise. Its light is taken away every day and it echoes red light, *When he found it going down into a black sea . . . where it rises*."

Author's comment: The verse, *When he found it going down into a black sea . . . where it rises*, is an explanation of the course taken by the sun from the time it sets until it rises again in its celestial orbit as per Ptolemy's theory of orbit in those days, based on belief in the earth's

remaining stationary and heavenly bodies revolving around it. That is why he attributed it to one of the scholars.

The words, "that is, it sets in a black sea, then breaks through the earth on the way back to where it rises" are the words of one of the narrators of the oral tradition, not his words. Thus because of the narrator's inability to understand, he explained God's words, *going down into a black sea*, as the sun's going down in a sea and disappearing in it, then swimming in it like a fish in water and breaking through the earth until it reaches the point where it rises, then going under the Throne, which according to the narrator's belief, was a heaven above the seven heavens or a luminous body—the greatest in existence—placed above the seventh heaven. It remains there until it is granted permission to rise. It is clothed in red light and it rises.

The narrator is alluding in (the statement), "and is confused under the Throne until it is granted permission" to another oral tradition narration attributed to the Prophet, which says that the angels take the sun away after it sets and stop it under the Throne. Its light is taken away and it remains there without knowing what it will be ordered to do the following morning until it is clothed in light and ordered to rise.

He made the same mistake in explaining the Throne there as he made in explaining the sunset here and so he got further and further away from the truth.

There is no explanation of the Throne as the ninth planet or as a high luminous body in the shape of a bed in the Book or in any reliable Sunna. His understanding fabricated it. We have already discussed most of the oral traditions on the Throne at the beginning of part 8 of this book [i.e., the Arabic edition].

There is in his statement, "one of the scholars has said"—something of an allusion to the fact that this opinion was not approved by him. In spite of that he could not allow the truth to be told, but why not? If naiveté in understanding led to this among the people of his time with regard to a proposition which was easy to conceptualize, one shudders to think what they would have done if they had been taught something which cannot be confirmed by their outward senses or comprehended by the limit of their thought.

Al-Durr al-manthūr says that ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Saʿīd b. Manṣūr, Ibn Jarīr, Ibn Mundhir, and Ibn Abī Ḥātim cite via ʿUthmān b. Abī Ḥāḍir Ibn ʿAbbās' telling them that Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān recited the verse

which is in Sūrat al-Kahf: *going down into a hot sea.* Ibn ʿAbbās said, I told Muʿawiya:

> "We only recite *ḥamiʾa* (black). Muʿāwiya then asked ʿAbdullāh b. ʿUmar: And how do you recite it? ʿAbdullāh replied: As you have recited it. Ibn ʿAbbās said: So I told Muʿāwiya: The Qurʾan was revealed in my household. Thereafter, he sent a note to Kaʿb asking him: Where do you find the sun setting in the Torah? Kaʿb told him: Ask the people of the Arabic language because they know best. As for myself, I find that in the Torah, the sun sets in water and clay. He pointed to the west. Ibn Abī Ḥāḍir said: How would you like my telling you something through which you could gain insight into *hamiʾatin*? Ibn ʿAbbās replied: What is that? I replied: Among what we find is what Tubbaʿ says referring to Dhū l-Qarnayn—about his fondness and pursuit of knowledge: Dhū l-Qarnayn lived as a Muslim; other kings served him and mobilized troops for him; he came to the east and the west seeking means of access to rule from a wise guide, and he saw the sun disappear at sunset into a sea which had *khalb* and *thaʾṭ ḥarmad*. "Ibn ʿAbbās asked: What is *khalb*? I replied: Clay, in their language. He asked: What is *thaʾṭ*? I replied: Mud. He asked: What is *ḥarmad*? I replied: Black. Ibn ʿAbbās then called a servant and told him: Write what this man says."

Author's comment: The hadith does not fit in so well with the ways of reciting considered to be incontrovertible and which people have settled upon. Ibn Hishām's *al-Tījān* cites the same hadith but adds that Ibn ʿAbbās recited these lines of poetry to Muʿāwiya and Muʿāwiya asked him what *khalb*, *thaʾṭ*, and *ḥarmad* mean. He replied: *Khalb* means mud and *thaʾṭ* means the clay underneath it. *Ḥarmad* means the pebbles and stones underneath that. He then cited the *qaṣīda* (ode). This discrepancy warns of some problem with the oral tradition.

Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī says on the authority of Abū Baṣīr on the authority of Abū Jaʿfar regarding God's words: *whom We had given no shelter from it.* He replied: "They did not know how to build houses."

Tafsīr al-Qummī says about the same verse (*whom We had given no shelter from it*): "They did not know how to make clothes."

Al-Durr al-manthūr says: Ibn Mundhir cites on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās about the words, *Until, when he reached between al-saddayn.* He

said: The two mountains—Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī says on the authority of al-Mufaḍḍal: I asked al-Ṣādiq about the words, *I will make a fortified barrier* (radman) *between you and them*. He replied:

> "Dissimulation (*taqiyya*). *So they were not able to scale it nor could they make a hole in it* [18:97]. When you act with *taqiyya*, they cannot get the better of you by cunning. It is impregnable protection. It has become a barrier between you and your enemies in which they cannot make a hole."
>
> It also says on the authority of Jābir, on his authority, regarding the same verse: [It means] *Taqiyya*.

Author's comment: Both oral traditions are examples of demonstrating the Qur'an's continuing relevance and applicability and are not proper exegesis.

Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī says on the authority of al-Aṣbagh b. Nubāta on the authority of ʿAlī: *And on that day We will leave a part of them in conflict with another part*, means the Day of Resurrection.

Author's comment: The context indicates that it is one of the portents of the Hour. It may be what is meant by the Day of Resurrection. It may also be correct to call some of the events leading up to it the "Day of Resurrection."

It [*Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī*] also says on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ḥakīm:

> "I wrote a note to Abū ʿAbdullāh asking: Can the soul know? He said: No. So I asked: God says: *Those whose eyes were under a cover from My reminder and they could not even hear*. He said: It is like His words: *they could not bear to hear and they did not see* (11:20). I asked: And so He censured them? He replied: He did not censure them for what He had done to them. However, He did censure them for what they had done. If they had not been pretentious, they would not have been accountable for anything."

Author's comment: that is, They caused this veil so they are responsible for its consequences.

Tafsīr al-Qummī says about the same verse [*Those whose eyes were under a cover . . .*]: "They would not look at the signs, the heavens and the earth God had created."

Author's comment: In *ʿUyūn akhbār al-Riḍā*, on the authority of

al-Riḍā, the verse is applied to those who deny the Imams' guardianship. However this is an example of demonstrating the Qur'an's continued relevance and applicability.

About the Story of Dhū l-Qarnayn

almizan.org

A Qur'anic and Historical Study Divided into Sections

1. The Story of Dhū l-Qarnayn in the Qur'an

His name, the history of the time of his birth, his life, lineage, and all his other particular characteristics are not addressed as was customary in the stories (of the people of) the past. Rather, the Qur'an suffices itself with mentioning three journeys he made. The first was to the West, until he reached where the sun sets—he found it setting in a black or hot sea and found a people there. His second journey was to the East, until he reached where the sun rises—he found it rising on a people for whom God had not made any shelter. His third journey was to a place between two mountains—he found on that side of them a people who could hardly understand a word. They complained to him about the mischief made in the land by Gog and Magog and offered to pay him a tribute in exchange for his building a barrier between their people and Gog and Magog. He fulfilled their request by building the barrier and promised them that he would build it above their expectations, refusing to take any tribute. He only asked them to help him with parts and labor. In the story, there is reference to men and blocks of iron, bellows, and molten brass.

The particulars and fundamental aspects which can be understood from the story are:

First: That the person the story is about was called Dhū l-Qarnayn before the story in the Qur'an was revealed and indeed even in his lifetime, as is clear from the context: *And they ask you about Dhū l-Qarnayn . . .* (18:83). *We said: O Dhū l-Qarnayn . . .* (18:86). *They said: O Dhū l-Qarnayn . . .* (18:94).

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Second: He believed in God and the Final Day and followed the religion of Truth, as is clear from His words: *This is a mercy from my Lord, but when the promise of my Lord comes to pass He will make it level with the ground, and the promise of my Lord is ever true* (18:98). *As to him who is unjust, we will chastise him, then shall he be returned to his Lord, and He will chastise him with an exemplary chastisement* (18:87). *And as for him*

who believes and does good . . . (18:88).

It adds to his religious standing that His words, *either give them a chastisement or do them a benefit*, indicate his being supported with revelation, inspiration or one of God's prophets who was with him to guide him by communicating the revelation to him.

Third: He was one of those for whom God had brought together all the good of this world and the hereafter. As for the good of this world, it was the mighty kingdom which took him from where the sun sets to where it rises. Nothing stood up to him and all means of access were at his disposal. As for the good of the hereafter, it was universal administration of justice, establishment of the truth, forgiveness, pardon, gentleness, self-respect, spreading good, and keeping evil at bay. This is all evidenced by His words: *Surely We established him in the land and granted him means of access to everything* (18:84), as well as what can be inferred from the context—his physical and spiritual superiority.

Fourth: He came about upon a nation of evildoers in the west and punished them.

Fifth: The fortified barrier which he built was neither where the sun sets nor where it rises because after he reached where the sun rises, he followed another course until he reached a place between the two mountains.

One of the features of his fortified barrier—in addition to not being in the west or the east—was that it was between two mountains like walls; he filled the space between the two mountain sides and used blocks of iron and molten brass to build it. It had to have been in a mountain pass which was the link between two of the populated world's edges.

2 Reference to Dhū l-Qarnayn, the Barrier, Gog and Magog

In the traditions of the ancient (peoples), the early historians make no reference to a king who was called Dhū l-Qarnayn in his (the king's) lifetime or what means the same as that in languages other than Arabic, of Ya'juj and Ma'juj with those precise spellings or of a barrier attributable to him by name. True, boastful poetry mentioning Dhū l-Qarnayn is attributed to one of the kings of the Yemeni Ḥimyar. It says that he was one of his Tubba[ʿ1] ancestors. It mentions his journey from the west

1 An appellation of one of the kings of Yemen who possessed Ḥimyar and Hadramawt (Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* [Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1980], 1:295). (Trans.)

to the east, the barrier against Gog and Magog. The reader will see some of them in later sections.

Magog, or Gog and Magog are mentioned in several places in the Books of the Old Testament. Genesis 10:1–2 says:

> Now these are the generations of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth; and unto them were sons born after the flood. The sons of Japheth: Gomer, and Magog, and Madai, and Javan, and Tubal, and Meshech, and Tiras.

Ezekiel 38:1–15 says:

> And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying: Son of man, set thy face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and prophesy against him, and say: Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; and I will turn you about, and put hooks into thy jaws, and I will bring you forth, and all thine army, horses and horsemen, all of them clothed most gorgeously, a great company with buckler and shield, all of them handling swords: Persia, Cush, and Put with them, all of them with shield and helmet; Gomer, and all his bands; the house of Togarmah in the uttermost parts of the north, and all his bands; even many peoples with you. Be thou prepared, and prepare for thyself, thou, and all thy company that are assembled unto you, and be thou guarded of them. After many days thou shalt be mustered for service, in the latter years thou shalt come against the land that is brought back from the sword, that is gathered out of many peoples, against the mountains of Israel, which have been a continual waste; but it is brought forth out of the peoples, and they dwell safely all of them. And thou shalt ascend, thou shalt come like a storm, thou shalt be like a cloud to cover the land, thou, and all thy bands, and many peoples with you. Thus saith the Lord God: It shall come to pass in that day, that things shall come into thy mind, and thou shalt devise an evil device; and thou shalt say: I will go up against the land of unwalled villages; I will come upon them that are at quiet, that dwell safely, all of them dwelling without walls, and having neither bars nor gates; to take the spoil and to take the prey; to turn thy hand against the waste places that are now inhabited, and against the people that are gathered out of the

> nations, that have gotten cattle and goods, that dwell in the middle of the earth. Sheba, and Dedan, and the merchants of Tarshish, with all the magnates thereof, shall say unto you: Comest thou to take the spoil? hast thou assembled thy company to take the prey? To carry away silver and gold, to take away cattle and goods, to take great spoil? Therefore, son of man, prophesy, and say unto Gog: Thus saith the Lord God: In that day when My people Israel dwelleth safely, shalt thou not know it? And thou shalt come from thy place out of the uttermost parts of the north . . .

Ezekiel[1] 39:1–6 says, continuing from the above:

> And thou, son of man, prophesy against Gog, and say: Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, I am against you, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal; and I will turn you about and lead you on, and will cause you to come up from the uttermost parts of the north; and I will bring you upon the mountains of Israel; and I will smite thy bow out of thy left hand, and will cause thine arrows to fall out of thy right hand. Thou shalt fall upon the mountains of Israel, thou, and all thy bands, and the peoples that are with you; I will give you unto the ravenous birds of every sort and to the beasts of the field, to be devoured. Thou shalt fall upon the open field; for I have spoken it, saith the Lord God. And I will send a fire on Magog, and on them that dwell safely in the isles; and they shall know that I am the Lord.

Revelation 20 says:

> And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and

1 He was among the Jews during the time of their captivity in Babylon.

> reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore. They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. But fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

It is understood from this that Magog, or Gog and Magog were a mighty nation or nations which lived in the farthest north of Asia of the populated world at that time. They were belligerent peoples known for forays and raids.

It is now appropriate to make an educated guess that this Dhū l-Qarnayn was one of the great kings who blocked the way of these mischief-makers in the land. The barrier attributed to him has to be a partition between a northern area and south of the continent of Asia, for example, the Great Wall of China, Bāb al-Abwāb, the Dāriyāl Barrier or one of the other ones.

Today the histories of peoples have acknowledged that a large savage, nomadic nation used to live in the northeast part of Asia—mountains and elevated areas in the north of China. They were ever growing in numbers and banding together. They attacked neighboring nations like China. They may have come down from their mountains and descended into the countries of Central Asia and the rest of the world, reaching northern Europe. Some of them settled in the countries they raided, like the majority of the inhabitants of northern Europe. It became populated with them and they busied themselves with agriculture and manufacture. Some of them went back, then returned time and again.[1]

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1 Some say that Gog and Magog are the nations who used to work the northern part of Asia, their lands stretching from Tibet and China to the Arctic Ocean

This also supports what we think to be likely—that the barrier under discussion is one of the barriers found in northern Asia dividing the north from the south.

3. Who is Dhū l-Qarnayn and Where is his Barrier?

Historians and exegetes have various opinions on the matter depending on their different views on what the story applies to.

(a) Some of them attribute the barrier referred to in the Qur'an is the Great Wall of China between China and Mongolia built by Qin Shi Huang, one of the Chinese Huangs, to stop attacks by the Mongols against China. It is three thousand kilometers long, nine meters wide, and twenty-five meters high. It was built with stone. Building commenced in 264 BCE and it was completed in ten or twenty years. Based on this premise, Dhū l-Qarnayn was the aforementioned Huang.

Comment: This is refuted by the fact that Dhū l-Qarnayn and his barrier's attributes and characteristics as mentioned in the Qur'an do not apply to this Huang and the Great Wall of China. There is no mention of this Huang's traveling from his land to the far west. Further, the barrier mentioned in the Qur'an is described as being a fortified barrier (*radm*) between two mountains. Blocks of iron and *qiṭr*, that is, molten brass, were used to build it. The Great Wall of China is three thousand kilometers long, stretching along flat land and mountains but it is not between two mountains. It is built of stone and no iron or molten brass was used to construct it.

(b) Some attribute the builder of the barrier to one of the Assyrian kings.[1] In about the seventh century before the birth of Christ, Scythian nations[2] would raid from the Caucasus mountain passes to Armenia then in the west of Iran and may even have reached the lands of Assyria, the

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in the north and the environs of Turkistan in the west. Narrated on the authority of Ibn Miskawayh: *Fākihat al-khulafāʾ* and *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*; see also *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*.

1 Narrated on the authority of al-Ḥasan b. Qaḥṭān al-Murūzī (physician and astronomer d. 548 AH): *Kitāb Kayhān Shanākht* in which the author states the name Bulaynis. He also calls him Alexander.

2 These peoples used to be called Scythians by the westerners. They are referred to in some surviving inscriptions which date back to the time of Darius. They are called Μαγωγ by the Greeks.

capital of which was Nineveh. They engulfed them, killing, taking prisoners, and pillaging so the kings of Nineveh built a barrier to stop them. It is as if what is meant by (Dhū l-Qarnayn's barrier) is Bāb al-Abwāb, construction or repair of which is attributed to Kisrā Anūshirwān, one of the kings of Persia.

Comment: However, the inapplicability of the particulars of the story counts against it.

(c) *Rūḥ al-maʿānī* says:

> It is said that he, that is, Dhū l-Qarnayn was Farīydūn son of Athfiyān son of Jamshīd, the fifth king Avestan king. He was a just king who obeyed God. *Ṣuwar al-aqālīm* by Abū Zayd al-Balkhī says: He was guided by revelation. All history books say that he was the king of the world and divided it (the world) among his three sons: Iraj, Salm, and Tur. He gave Iraj Iraq, India, and the Ḥijāz and put him in charge of the crown. He gave Salm Rome, and the lands of Egypt and Morocco. He gave Tur China, Turkey, and the East. He imposed a law for each of them to rule by. The three codes of law were called *siyāsa* which is the Arabized form of *Sī Aysā*, which means three codes of law.
>
> The reason he was called Dhū l-Qarnayn was either (1) because he was king of the two edges of the world; or (2) because of the length of his reign; according to *Rawḍat al-ṣafā*, he ruled for five hundred years, or, (3) because of his enormous courage and his defeating other kings.

Comment: The problem with this interpretation is that history does not recognize it.

(d) It is said that Dhū l-Qarnayn was Alexander of Macedon. This is the most popularly ascribed opinion and Alexander's barrier has become idiomatic. Some oral traditions attest to it, for example, the one in *Qurb al-isnād* on the authority of Mūsā b. Jaʿfar, an oral tradition on the authority of ʿĀmir on the authority of the Prophet, and Wahb b. Munabbih's oral tradition, both of which are narrated in *al-Durr al-manthūr*.

Comment: Some early exegetes among the Companions and successors give credence to this, for example, Muʿadh b. Jabal according to *Majmaʿ al-bayān* and Qatāda, according to what is narrated in *al-Durr al-manthūr*. Abū ʿAlī b. Sīnā describes him as Dhū l-Qarnayn when he mentions him in *Kitāb al-shifāʾ* and Imam al-Rāzī insists on it in *al-Tafsīr*

al-kabīr.

An abridged version of what he says is:

> The Qur'an indicates that the man's kingdom extended to the far west, far east, and to the north. That is the whole of the populated world. The name of a kingdom like that has to be preserved in history. The only king renowned in history books for having a kingdom stretching this far is Alexander.
>
> That is because after his father died, he gathered together the kings of Greece[1] and North Africa and defeated them, ending up at the Green Sea, then Egypt. He built Alexandria, then entered Syria, targeted the Israelites, came to Bayt al-Maqdis and made a sacrifice on its altar. He then turned toward Armenia and Bāb al-Abwāb. The Iraqis, Egyptians, and Berbers became subject to him and he seized Iran. He headed for India and China and raided the remote nations. He returned to Khurāsān and built many cities, then returned to Iraq. He died in Shahrzūr or Rūmiyyat al-Madā'in and was taken to Alexandria where he was buried. He lived for thirty-three years and his reign lasted twelve years.
>
> Because of what the Qur'an says—that Dhū l-Qarnayn was the king of most of the populated world—and it is recorded in history that this was true of Alexander, there has to be no doubt that Dhū l-Qarnayn means Alexander.

1) History does not concede what he said—that the only king ever to have ruled most of the populated world was Alexander of Macedon. There were other kings equal to him or who ruled over more than he did.

2) History does not describe Alexander with Dhū l-Qarnayn's characteristics as mentioned in the Qur'an and may even refute his being Dhū l-Qarnayn. The Qur'an states that Dhū l-Qarnayn believed in God and the Final Day, which is monotheistic belief. Alexander was a Sabaean idolater as evidenced by his making a sacrifice to Jupiter. The Qur'an states that Dhū l-Qarnayn was one of God's gentle, just, and pious servants, whereas history tells that Alexander was the exact opposite.

3) None of the historians record Alexander of Macedon's having built a barrier against Gog and Magog as described in the Qur'an.

Al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya says in an oral tradition about Dhū

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1 Here the author uses the word Rūm, which commonly refers to Greece, or the Byzantines. (Trans.)

> l-Qarnayn:
>
> Isḥāq b. Bishr says on the authority of Saʿīd b. Bashīr on the authority of Qatāda: Alexander was Dhū l-Qarnayn. His father was the first caesar and was of Sām son of Noah's offspring. The second Dhū l-Qarnayn was Alexander son of Philip—whose lineage traces back to Esau son of Isaac son of Abraham—the Macedonian, the Greek, the Egyptian, founder of Alexandria by whose days Rome was dated. He came a long time after the first one.
>
> He lived approximately three hundred years before Christ. Aristotle the philosopher was his vizier. It was he who killed Dārā son of Dārā, subjugated the kings of Persia, and trampled their land.

The only reason we have drawn attention to it is because many people believe that they are one and the same and that the one mentioned in the Qur'an is the one whose vizier was Aristotle, thus erring in the process. Corruption far and wide results, because the former was a pious, believing servant whose vizier was al-Khiḍr who was a prophet as we have established above, whereas the latter was a polytheist whose vizier was a philosopher. There is more than two thousand years' difference between the times when they lived. One has nothing to do with the other. They are not the same. Only an ignorant person who does not know the truth of matters would get them mixed up.

Imam Rāzī and what he said (above) are insinuated in the above quote. However, if the reader were to scrutinize closely what (Imam Rāzī) said, as quoted, and to compare it with what (Ibn Kathīr) said, he would discover that Ibn Kathīr's error is no less than Imam Rāzī's because there is no trace in history of any king over two thousand three hundred years before Christ who was king of the world from the far west to the far east and to the north, who built the barrier, who was a pious believer or even a prophet, whose vizier was al-Khiḍr, who entered the darkness seeking the water of life and whose name was Alexander or anything else.

(e) A number of historians, for example, al-Aṣmaʿī in *Tārīkh al-ʿArab qabl al-islām* [The history of the Arabs before Islam], Ibn Hishām in his *Sīra*, and *al-Tījān*, and Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī in *al-Athār al-bāqiya*, Nashwān b. Saʿīd al-Ḥimyarī in *Shams al-ʿulūm*—as is narrated on their authority—and others have stated that Dhū l-Qarnayn was one of the

Yemeni Adhwā' Tubbaʿ,[1] one of the kings of Ḥimyar.

They disagree over his name. It is claimed that he was called Muṣʿab b. ʿAbdullāh. In the alternative, it is claimed that his name was Ṣaʿb b. Dhī l-Marāʾid who was the first of the Tubbaʿ. It was he who passed judgment in Abraham's favor in the predators' well. It is claimed that he was Tubbaʿ of al-Aqran whose name was Ḥassān. Al-Aṣmaʿī says that he was Asʿad al-Kāmil the fourth Tubbaʿ son of Ḥassān al-Aqran, king of Karb, the second Tubbaʿ son of Malik the first Tubbaʿ. Alternatively, it is said that his name was Shammar Yarʿish.

Dhū l-Qarnayn is mentioned and boasted about in many of the Ḥimyarī poems and in some of those of the poets of the Days of Ignorance. *Al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya* says: Ibn Hishām recited al-Aʿsha's poem:[2]

al-Ṣaʿb, Dhū l-Qarnayn became buried
With horns pointing backwards in the grave, the most highborn burial

It was stated above in the discussion on the relevant narrations that ʿUthmān b. Abī al-Ḥāḍir recited to Ibn ʿAbbās what one of the Ḥimyarī had said:

almizan.org

1 The kingdom of Yemen was divided into eighty-four *miklāf*s. A *mikhlāf* is like a modern-day district (*qaḍāʾ*) or province (*mudīryya*). Every *mikhlāf* comprised several citadels, each of which was called a palace or *maḥfid* inhabited by a group of the nation whose senior would rule them. The owner of the palace in charge of their affairs would be called *Dhī*, e.g., Dhī Ghamdān and Dhī Muʿīn i.e., the owner of Ghamdān and the owner of Muʿīn. The plural is *adhwāʾ* or *dhawīn*. The person in charge of the *mikhlāf* would be called a *qīl* (pl. *aqyāl*). The person in charge of a group of *mikhlāf*s would be called a *malik* (king). A *malik* who annexed Hadramawt and Shaḥr to Yemen and ruled all three would be known as a *tubbaʿ*. If he just ruled Yemen, he would just be called a *malik* (King) and not a *tubbaʿ*. Fifty names of *adhwāʾ* have been discovered. However, only eight of the *adhwāʾ* were *malik*s, namely the *malik*s of Ḥimyar. They were among the kings of the one of the last ruling states from before. Fourteen were considered to be kings. What can be gleaned of the history of the Yemeni kings is from very vague sources and narrations the details of which cannot be relied upon.

2 It looks as if Ibn Hishām recited to al-Aʿsha, but given the different times in which they lived, this would be impossible; perhaps a different Ibn Hishām is meant. (Trans.)

Dhū l-Qarnayn my grandfather was a Muslim
A king whom other kings gave service and mustered
He reached the eastern and western horizons seeking
The means of command from a wise guide
He saw where the sun disappears when it sets
Into a sea which has clay and black mud

Al-Maqrīzī says in *Khiṭaṭ al-Maqrīzī*:

Know that the authoritative opinion among the scholars of oral traditions is that Dhū l-Qarnayn to whom God refers in His noble Book was an Arab—*And they ask you about Dhū l-Qarnayn. Say: I will recite to you an account of him. Surely We established him in the land and granted him means of access to everything.* He is mentioned often in Arab poetry.

His name was al-Ṣaʿb b. Dhī l-Marāʾid b. al-Ḥārith al-Rāʾish b. al-Himāl Dhī Sadad b. ʿAd Dhī Manḥ b. ʿĀr al-Milṭāṭ b. Saksak b. Wāʾil b. Ḥimyar b. Sabā b. Yashjab b. Yaʿrab b. Qaḥṭān b. Hūd b. ʿĀbir b. Shāliḥ b. Arfkhashud b. Sām b. Nūḥ. He was one of the kings of Ḥimyar who were pure Arabs (*al-ʿArab al-ʿāriba*).[1] They are also known as *al-ʿArab al-ʿurabāʾ*. Dhū l-Qarnayn was a crowned Tubbaʿ. When he became king, he was a tyrant but he then humbled himself before God and joined al-Khiḍr. Anyone who thinks that Alexander son of Philip was Dhū l-Qarnayn who built the barrier is wrong. This is because the word *Dhū* is Arabic. Dhū l-Qarnayn was one of the Arabs' honorific titles for the kings of Yemen. The other man was Greco-Roman.[2]

Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī says:

The general consensus of the people of the first book[3] is that al-Khiḍr was around in the days of Afrīdūn al-Malik b. al-Ḍaḥḥāk.

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1 *al-ʿArab al-ʿāriba* means the Arabs before Ismāʿīl. Ismāʿīl and his offspring are *al-ʿArab al-mustaʿriba* (naturalized Arabs).

2 This is another example of the interchangeability between the terms for Greeks and Romans. Here it is more explicit, al-Maqrīzī mentions Rūmī Yūnānī. (Trans.)

3 Here we cannot know with certainty what al-Ṭabarī was referring to; it may mean the Jews, with the first book being a reference to the Torah, or it may mean the people of Adam and the scrolls. (Trans.)

> It is also said that he was around in the days of Moses son of ʿImrān. It is claimed that he was in Dhū l-Qarnayn the Great's vanguard who was around during the days of Abraham the friend and that al-Khiḍr reached the river of life with Dhū l-Qarnayn during the days of Dhū l-Qarnayn's journey. Al-Khiḍr drank from its water without Dhū l-Qarnayn's knowledge or that of anyone with him. He received everlasting life and remains alive among them to this day. Others say that Dhū l-Qarnayn, who was around during the time of Abraham the friend, was Afrīdūn son of Ḍaḥḥāk and that al-Khiḍr was in his vanguard.

In *al-Tijān fī maʿrifat mulūk al-zamān*, Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Malik b. Hishām says after mentioning Dhū l-Qarnayn's lineage which we have cited:

> He was a crowned Tubbaʿ. When he became king, he was a tyrant but then he became humble and joined al-Khiḍr at Bayt al-Maqdis. He traveled with him to the eastern and western climes and they were granted means of access to everything as God relates. He built the barrier against Gog and Magog and died in Iraq.
>
> As for Alexander, he was Greek. He was known as Alexander of Macedon. Ibn ʿAbbās was asked about Dhū l-Qarnayn. He replied: He was from Ḥimyar. He was al-Ṣaʿb b. Dhī l-Marāʾid whom God established in the land and whom He granted means of access to everything. He reached the two horns of the sun and the top of the earth and built a barrier against Gog and Magog. He was asked: What about Alexander? He replied: He was a pious, wise Greek man who built a lighthouse at the sea in Africa. He took the land of Rome and came to the sea of the Arabs. He left a great heritage among the Arabs—manufacture and cities.

Kaʿb al-Aḥbār was asked about Dhū l-Qarnayn. He replied:

> What has come down from our rabbis and ancestors and is correct is that he was from Ḥimyar and that he was al-Ṣaʿb b. Dhī l-Marāʾid. Alexander was a man from Greece of the progeny of Esau son of Isaac son of Abraham the friend (of God). Alexander's men[1] including Galinus and Aristotle lived to see the Messiah son of Maryam.

1 This does not conform with what history is certain of, i.e., that he ruled from 356 to 324 BCE.

Al-Hamadānī says in *Kitāb al-ansāb*:

> Kahlān b. Saba begat Zayd and Zayd begat ʿUrayb and Malik and Ghālib and ʿUmaykrab. Haytham said: ʿUmaykrab b. Sabā was the brother of Ḥimyar and Kahlān. ʿUmaykrab begat Abū Malik then Daraḥa and Muhaylīl sons of ʿUmaykrab. Ghālib begat Junāda b. Ghālib who became king after Muhaylīl son of ʿUmaykrab son of Sabā. ʿUrayb begat ʿAmr and ʿAmr begat Zayd, Humaysaʿ. His teknonym (*kunyā*) was Abū l- Ṣaʿb and he was the first Dhū l-Qarnayn. He was the surveyor [i.e., builder]. It is about him that al-Nuʿmān b. Bashīr says:
>
> Who among the people as a band will oppose us

In terms of generosity when Dhū l-Qarnayn and Ḥātim were of us. Al-Ḥārithī says about him:

> Name one of your own that we may know him
> Who had the name Malik in the Days of Ignorance
> Like the two Tubbaʿs and Dhū l-Qarnayn.

Accepted by the people of discernment; the most correct word is the above.

Ibn Abī Dhiʾb al-Khuzāʿī says about him:

> One of us was he who traveled far to the east and west
> And climbed up in all the lands and every hill
> He reached the horn of the sun in the east and the west
> He laid the foundation of the barrier then raised up a fortified barrier against Magog
> That was Dhū l-Qarnayn the pride of Ḥimyar
> Not even an army of elephants could be reckoned or considered a match for him.

Al-Hamadāni says: The scholars of Hamadān say: Dhū l-Qarnayn was al-Ṣaʿb b. Mālik b. al-Ḥārith al-Āʿla b. Rabīʿa b. al-Ḥayyār b. Mālik. There are many opinions on Dhū l-Qarnayn.

It is comprehensive. The following can be understood from it:

1) More than one of the kings of Ḥimyar was addressed by the honorific title Dhū l-Qarnayn. There was a first, great Dhū l-Qarnayn and others.

2) The first Dhū l-Qarnayn was the one who built the barrier against Gog and Magog several centuries before Alexander of Macedon. He was a contemporary of Abraham the friend (of God) or came after him. The latter follows necessarily from what Ibn Hishām relates about his

meeting al-Khiḍr at Bayt al-Maqdis which was built several centuries after Abraham in the time of David and Solomon (Sulāyman). In any event he came before him—the history of the kings of Ḥimyar is vague.

Two points in relation to his chosen opinion remain to be discussed:

1) Where is this barrier which he—the Ḥimyarī Tubbaʿ—built?

2) Who was this nation who made mischief in the land whom he built the barrier against. Is this barrier one of those built in Yemen or its environs, for example, the Maʾrib Dam or other dams. The problem is that they were dams built to store drinking and irrigation water, not as a barrier. Furthermore, blocks of iron and molten brass—mentioned by God in His Book—were not used to build it or any of the others. Was there a nation which made mischief and attacked them? The fact is that no one but the Egyptians, Assyrians, Chaldaeans, and other civilized city-dwelling people surrounded them.

One of our top contemporary researchers[1] supports the view. A summary of what he says is as follows:

> Dhū l-Qarnayn as mentioned in the Qur'an lived several centuries before Alexander of Macedon. He was not one and the same. Rather, he was one of the pious Tubābaʿa al-Adhwāʾ kings of Yemen. He was of the character of a group of them called Dhī, for example, Dhī Hamadān, Dhī Ghamdān, Dhī Manār, Dhī l-Adhʿār, Dhī Yazn, etc.
>
> He was a monotheistic Muslim, just, well-behaved, strong, awe-inspiring, and brave. He traveled with a vast army toward the west, seized Egypt and what was beyond. He then continued traveling along the shore of the Mediterranean until he reached the edge of the Atlantic, so he found the sun setting in a black or hot sea. He then traveled back toward the east, building Afrikiyya[2] on his way. He was fiercely passionate and had experience in building and construction. He carried on traveling until he passed the peninsula and steppes of Central Asia. He reached Turkistan and the Great Wall of China. There he found a people for whom God had not made shelter from the sun.

1 ʿAllāma Sayyid Hibat al-Dīn al-Shahristānī.

2 Africus the King (*malik*) built it. It is said that he was Dhū l-Qarnayn or alternatively that he was Dhū l-Qarnayn's father or brother. The continent of Africa was named after him.

> He then turned toward the north until he reached the Tropic of Cancer (*madār al-saraṭān*). That may be what is commonly referred to as his entering the darkness. The people of that country asked him to build them a wall to keep out Gog and Magog because Yemenis—of whom Dhū l-Qarnayn was one—were known for building barriers and for their experience in doing so. Thus, he built them a barrier.
>
> If this barrier is the Great Wall between China and Mongolia, that constituted repair of the parts of the wall which had been destroyed by the passage of time because one of the Huangs of China had built it originally, before that. If it was some other barrier then there is no problem. One of the things Dhū l-Qarnayn—whose real name was Shammar Yarʿish—built in those areas was the city of Samarqand,[1] so people say.
>
> What supports that is Dhū l-Qarnayn's being the pious Arab king the Bedouin asked God's Messenger about. The noble Qur'an refers to him as a reminder and as a lesson. It would have been easier to accept than reference to the story of one of the Greek, Persian or Chinese kings, remote nations the Bedouin had no desire to hear tales about or learn from their heritage. That is why the Qur'an did not address any of their tales.

The only remaining problem with this theory is that there is no way that the Great Wall of China can be Dhū l-Qarnayn's barrier because Dhū l-Qarnayn—as he stated—lived several centuries before Alexander. The man who built the Great Wall of China came approximately half a century after Alexander. There are some other barriers apart from the Great Wall to the north but it is said that they are built from stone. There is no trace in them of blocks of iron or molten brass.

Tafsīr al-jawāhir says after an introduction, the gist of which is that with the help of engravings uncovered in the ruins of Yemen, out of the states of Yemen, three states are known:

1) The state of Muʿīn, the capital of which was Qarnāʾ.

1 It is said that he passed by the environs of Turkistan, destroyed Sind and built Samarqand. It is said that the etymology is *Shammar kand* meaning Shammar ripped out and destroyed Sind. The name held and became Arabized into Samarqand.

Archeologists[1] estimate that the remains of the state of Qarnāʾ originate from the fourteenth century BCE to the seventh or eighth century BCE. They have come across evidence of some of the kings of this state—there are twenty-six of them, for example, Ab Yadaʿ or Ab Yadaʿ Yanīʿ, that is, al-Munqid.

2) The state of Sabā, that is, the Qaḥṭānīs who were originally Adhwāʾ then Aqyāl. Sabā, whose palace was Ṣarwāḥ in eastern Ṣanaʿa, proved to the brightest of all of them. He gained the upper hand over all the others. Their reign ran from 850 BCE to 115 BCE. Twenty-seven of their kings are known, twenty-five of whom were known as Makrib, for example, Makrib Yathʿamir, Makrib Dhimr ʿAlā, and twelve of them were just called Malik (king), for example, Malik Dharḥ and Malik Yarīm Ayman.

3) The Ḥimyarī state—in two stages. The first—the kings of Sabā and Rīdān ruled from 275 BCE to 115 BCE. They were just kings (*mulūk*). The second stage of kings were kings of Sabā, Rīdān, Hadramawt and elsewhere. There were fourteen of them. Most of them were Tubbaʿs. The first one was Shammar Yarʿish, the second was Dhū l-Qarnayn, the third ʿAmr, that is, Bilqīs'[2] husband. The last one was Dhī Jadn. They ruled from 275 CE to 525 CE.

The link to the kings of Yemen through bearing the honorific title of Dhī is clear. We do not find any other kings, for example, the kings of Greece being called Dhī. Thus, Dhū l-Qarnayn was one of the kings of Yemen. There was reference above to one of them actually being called Dhū l-Qarnayn. However is this Dhū l-Qarnayn who is referred to in the Qur'an?

Comment: Absolutely not, because the one referred to had to have been very close to our time. That is not said of any of them, except of course what storytellers say in their history, for example, that Shammar Yarʿish reached the lands of Iraq, Persia, Khurāsān, and Ṣaghad, and built the city of Samarqand which was originally called Shamarkand. The storytellers also say that Asʿad Abū Karb raided Azerbaijan and sent his son Ḥassan to al-Ṣaghad, his son Yaʿfar to Rome, and his nephew to Persia.

1 The author refers to *ʿulamāʾ*. (Trans.)

2 This Bilqīs was not the Queen of Sheba whom Solomon b. David (Sulaymān b. Dāwūd) is said to have married after having her brought from Sheba. He lived around a thousand years before the birth of Christ.

They say that some of the Ḥimyarīs remain in China to this day as a result of that king's raids.

Ibn Khaldūn and others reject these oral traditions and say that they are exaggerated. They refute them with geographical and historical evidence.

Thus, Dhū l-Qarnayn was of an Arab nation. However he is ancient history before familiar history.

(f) It is said that Dhū l-Qarnayn was Cyrus, one of the Achaemenian kings who ruled from 560 to 539 BCE. It was he who founded the Iranian empire and united Persia and Media. He subjugated Babylon and allowed the Jews to return from Babylon to Jerusalem, helped build the temple, subjugated Egypt, then crossed to Greece, defeated the Greeks, and reached the far west. He then traveled to the far east of the civilized world.

One of those close to our time[1] has said so. Subsequently, an Indian researcher[2] has recently exerted efforts to clarify and explain. A brief explanation is that the one who is referred to in the Qur'an as Dhū l-Qarnayn has to be this great king [Cyrus] because he had a monotheistic belief in God, was fair with his subjects, merciful, gentle, did good, and subjugated oppressors and aggressors. God granted him the means of access to everything. He had religion, reason, good etiquette, funds, power, wealth, courage, and means at his disposal.

He traveled—as described by God in His Book—once toward the west until he had seized Lydia and its environs. He then traveled again, this time toward the east until he reached where the sun set. There, he encountered a nomadic, savage people who lived in the steppes. He then built the barrier. Evidence indicates that it is the barrier constructed across the Darial pass in the Caucasus mountains near the city of Tbilisi.

This is the gist of what he says. Here are the details:

His belief in God and the Final Day: Proof of that is in the Old Testament, for example, the Book of Ezra, chapter 1; the Book of Daniel, chapter 6; the Book of Isaiah, chapters 44 and 45 lies in his being exalted and described as holy to the point that he is as the Lord's shepherd. Isaiah 45:1 says:

> [1] Thus saith the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right

1 Sir Aḥmad Khān al-Hindī. (Ed.)

2 The researcher Mawlānā Abū l-Kalām Āzād. (Ed.)

> hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him, and to loose the loins of kings; to open the doors before him, and that the gates may not be shut: [2] I will go before you, and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the doors of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron; [3] And I will give you the treasures of darkness, and hidden riches of secret places, that thou mayest know that I am the Lord, who call you by thy name, even the God of Israel. [4] For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel Mine elect, I have called you by thy name, I have surnamed you, though thou hast not known Me.

Putting aside the fact that it is revelation, the Jews, with their chauvinism, would not consider a polytheistic, idolatrous Zoroastrian—if that is what Cyrus was—to be a divinely appointed, rightly guided, supported Messiah or shepherd for the Lord.

Furthermore, archeological cuneiform engravings and writings about Darius the Great, who lived just eight years after Cyrus, speak of Darius' being a monotheist and not a polytheist. It is inconceivable that there would be a change from Cyrus' religion in such a short passage of time.

As for his personal merits, it is enough to refer to the tales about him and information on his lifestyle which are recorded and to see how he dealt with the tyrants and despots who rebelled against him or waged war against him, for example, the kings of Media, Lydia, Babylon, Egypt, the tyrannical Bedouin on the outskirts of Bactria (that is, Balkh) and elsewhere. Whenever he defeated a people, he would forgive their criminals, treat their nobles with respect, treat their poor with compassion, and subdue the mischief-makers and treacherous among them.

The books of the Old Testament exalt him and the Jews accord him the greatest respect because he freed them from captivity in Babylon, returned them to their homeland, gave them money to rebuild the temple, and returned the valuables stolen from the temple and stored in the Babylonian kings' vaults. This in itself is further support for Dhū l-Qarnayn's being Cyrus because the question about Dhū l-Qarnayn was at the prompting of the Jews according to the oral traditions.

Ancient Greek historians, for example, Herodotus and others refer to him. They could do nothing but describe him as manly, heroic, magnanimous, charitable, forgiving, generous, merciful, and compassionate. They praise him profusely.

As for his Being Called Dhū l-Qarnayn

Even though historical records are free of anything that proves that, the recent discovery of a stone statue of him at the monument of Mirghab in the south of Iran eliminate any doubt that he was described as Dhū l-Qarnayn because his likeness has been sculpted with two horns growing out of the crown of his head from a single spot, one bent toward the front and the other bent toward the back.

This is similar to one of the ancients' opinion on the reason why Dhū l-Qarnayn was so-called—that he had a crown or helmet with two horns on it.

There is reference in the book of Daniel (8:1–9) to a dream Daniel had in which he saw Cyrus in the form of a ram with two horns:

> [**8:1**] In the third year of the reign of king Belshazzar a vision appeared unto me, even unto me Daniel, after that which appeared unto me at the first. [**8:2**] And I saw in the vision; now it was so, that when I saw, I was in Shushan the castle, which is in the province of Elam; and I saw in the vision, and I was by the stream Ulai. [**8:3**] And I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the stream a ram which had two horns; and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last. [**8:4**] I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; and no beasts could stand before him, neither was there any that could deliver out of his hand; but he did according to his will, and magnified himself. [**8:5**] And as I was considering, behold, a he-goat came from the west over the face of the whole earth, and touched not the ground; and the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. [**8:6**] And he came to the ram that had the two horns, which I saw standing before the stream, and ran at him in the fury of his power. [**8:7**] And I saw him come close unto the ram, and he was moved with choler [anger] against him, and smote the ram, and broke his two horns; and there was no power in the ram to stand before him; but he cast him down to the ground, and trampled upon him; and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand. [**8:8**] And the he-goat magnified himself exceedingly . . .

He then mentions after recounting the whole of the dream that Gabriel appeared to him and interpreted his dream in such a way that the ram

with two horns applied to Cyrus, his two horns being the two kingdoms of Persia and Media. The rough he-goat with a single horn was Alexander of Macedon.

As for his journey to the west and the east—his journey to the west was to push back the tyrant of Lydia who had led his troops wrongly and unfairly, without any justification, toward Cyrus. Cyrus advanced on him and routed him. He then followed him until he besieged him in the capital of his kingdom. He then conquered it and took him prisoner but pardoned him and all his supporters, treated him and them with respect. He was good to them even though he was entitled to dominate them and eliminate them.

The words [in the verse], *Until when he reached the place where the sun set, he found it going down into a black sea*, may apply to the west coast of Asia Minor.

The words [in the verse], *and found by it a people. We said: O Dhū l-Qarnayn! either give them a chastisement or do them a benefit*, is because they deserved to be punished for their tyranny, wrongdoing, and mischief.

He then journeyed toward the great desert in the east—around Bactria to suppress the danger presented by savage nomadic tribes which had risen up there to attack and cause mischief. The applicability of (the verse), *Until, when he reached the land of the rising of the sun, he found it rising on a people to whom We had given no shelter from it*, to that is clear.

As for his Building the Barrier

The barrier which is there in the Caucasus mountain pass stretches from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea and is called the Darial[1] Pass. It is between the town of Tbilisi and Vladikavkaz.

This barrier is in a pass between two towering mountains extending from its two sides. The pass alone is the gap linking the north and south sides of the mountains and the mountains with what is adjacent to them, that is, the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea—a natural barrier extending thousands of kilometers blocking south Asia from north Asia.

During those times, evil people living in northeast Asia would attack from the Caucasus mountain pass to its surroundings to the south,

1 This may be a corruption of *dar yol* which means pass in Turkish. In the regional vernacular, the barrier is called Demirkapu, meaning iron gate. (Trans.)

raiding what was beyond the mountains—Armenia, followed by Iran, then Assyria and Chaldea. They attacked in about the seventh century BCE and killed, took captives, and pillaged throughout the lands until they reached Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. That was roughly a century before Cyrus' time.

Ancient historians such as Herodotus the Greek refer to Cyrus' journey to the north of Iran to suppress the fires of civil war which had ignited there. It is likely that he built the barrier in the Darial Pass during this journey because out of need generated by the people of the north and their evildoing. He built it with stone and iron and it is the only fortified barrier in which iron was used. It is between the two mountain barriers. The applicability of (the verse), *therefore you only help me with strength, I will make a fortified barrier between you and them; Bring me blocks of iron*, to it is obvious.

What supports this claim is the fact that there is a river nearby called the Cyrus, which is what westerners call Kurush. There is another river called the Kura, which passes by Tbilisi. This barrier is referred to by Josephus the Jewish historian when he mentions his journey from the north Caucasus. It is not the wall, which is there at Bāb al-Abwāb on the edge of the Caspian, because history attributes the construction of that to Kisrā Anūshīrvān. Josephus lived before he did.[1]

Furthermore, Bāb al-Abwāb is definitely not Dhū l-Qarnayn's barrier referred to in the Qur'an because no iron whatsoever was used in its construction.

On Gog and Magog

Research into linguistic developments guides us to the fact that Gog and Magog were Mongols because in Chinese the words are *Mangug* and *Manjug*. It is as if the words Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj are a Hebrew transliteration. In Greek and other translations of the Old Testament, they are Gog and Magog. The close resemblance between Magog and Mangug settles it that the word is derived from the Chinese pronunciation Mangug, just as the words Mongol and Moghul derive from it. There are countless other similar examples in linguistics.

Thus Gog and Magog were the Mongols. This nation has since time

1 As it has been said he lived in the first century.

immemorial lived in northeast Asia, a large nation which at one time attacked China, at another Armenia, northern Iran and elsewhere via the Darial Pass in the Caucasus, and, yet another time, northern Europe (where they are called Scythians) after the barrier was built. This includes the nation that sacked Rome and it was at this time that the Roman Empire fell. It was stated above that what can be understood from the books of the Old Testament is that this mischief-making nation is of the inhabitants of the farthest north.

Comment: This is the end of our abridged version of what he [Mawlānā Abū l-Kalām Āzād] said [about Sir Aḥmad Khān al-Hindī's theory]. Even though some parts of it are not without problems, it applies best to the verses and is easier to accept than any of the other interpretations.

(g) Another explanation of Dhū l-Qarnayn is [from one of the author's teachers]—that Dhū l-Qarnayn was a member of an earlier species which preceded the human race. It is a strange view but it may explain some of Dhū l-Qarnayn's strange features, found in the oral traditions, for example, his coming back to life again and again, his being raised to heaven, descending to earth, the clouds being placed at his disposal to travel to the west and the east and light, darkness, thunder, and lightning being at his disposal. It is known that the historical accounts of that time have not said anything about that, so therefore [according to this logic], it must have occurred in an earlier time. His view of the authenticity of these narrations was too high.

Exegetes and historians have researched this story with careful scrutiny and discussed all its aspects extensively. The majority of them agree that Gog and Magog were a huge nation in the north of Asia. A number of them apply what the Qur'an says about their sallying forth at the end of time and making mischief in the land to the Tartars' attack on western Asia in the first half of the seventh century AH; they cite their disproportionate destruction of the civilization of mankind, their destruction of the land, extermination of people, pillaging of property, and the unprecedented atrocities they committed.

They first subjugated China, then swept into Turkistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, the Caucasus, and Asia Minor, destroying all the cities, towns, and fortresses they conquered, for example, Samarqand, Bukhara, Khawarizm, Merv, Nishabur, Rayy, etc. Thousands of people died in every city in the morning and in the afternoon out of everyone, not a single fire blower

would be left or a single stone be left upon another stone out of the building materials of the buildings.

They then returned to their country before coming back again, attacking Russia, destroying Poland, Hungary, attacking Rome, and forcing them to pay tribute. It would take a long time to give a detailed account of all their atrocities.

However they have neglected researching the matter of the barrier, with regard to their escape through it, and solving the problem presented by this because He did say: *So they were not able to scale it nor could they make a hole in it. He said: This is a mercy from my Lord, but when the promise of my Lord comes to pass He will make it level with the ground, and the promise of my Lord is ever true. And on that day We will leave a part of them in conflict with another part . . .* (18:97–98).

The literal meaning according to the exegetes is that this mischief-making nation will remain confined behind the barrier without any possibility of escape to the rest of the world, as long as the barrier remains intact until God's promise to flatten or destroy it comes. They will then escape through it to the people, spreading mischief and evil.

The exegetes and historians should have investigated this description of the barrier. If the aforementioned nation truly was the Tartars—who swept from northern China to Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Caucasus and then on to Asia Minor—where was the barrier in the Qur'an which they trampled, from behind which they came into these countries, turning them upside down?

If they were not the Tartars or any other bellicose nations throughout history, where is this barrier fortified with iron, part of the description of which is that it will stop a large nation from attacking all the other regions of the world for thousands of years. They are supposed to have no other way to reach the rest of the world apart from through the barrier erected against them. Today, all regions of the world are interconnected with land, sea, and air routes and there is no natural barrier, for example, a mountain, sea or artificial barrier such as a dam, wall or trench which can stop any nation from reaching any other. So what is the meaning of a nation's being stopped from reaching the rest of the world by a barrier between two mountains of any description and by any means?

[The author thinks that] the answer to this question, though God knows best, is that *dakkāʾ* comes from the word *dakk* meaning insignificance.

Lisān al-ʿArab says *jabalun dakkun*, means a low mountain. Making the barrier *dakkāʾ* means making it insignificant, of no consequence and of no use because there are so many alternative routes and so many different means of travel and transport by land, sea, and air.

The truth of this promise is the promise of the advancement of human civilization; various nations coming closer together to the point that people are not stopped by any barrier or hemmed in by any wall, and can move to any region of the world. People are not prevented from attacking or overwhelming any nation they want.

This interpretation is supported by the context provided by His words elsewhere, where He refers to Gog and Magog's assault: *Even when Gog and Magog are let loose and they shall break forth from every elevated place* (21:96), because it refers to their being let loose without any mention of the barrier.

Dakk has another meaning, mentioned in *al-Ṣiḥāḥ*: *Dakaktu al-rakī* meaning I buried the well with earth. Another meaning is a mountain's becoming a hill of clay. *Al-Ṣiḥāḥ* says: *Tadaktakat al-jibāl*, which means the mountains became hills of clay, all even.

It is possible that the barrier became one of many ancient structures buried under the earth by violent winds or submerged as a result of sea movement or the expansion of some of them, as proven by geological studies. Thus the problem is solved. Nevertheless, the previous explanation is better, but God knows best.

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Verses 103–108

Introduction

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These six verses are like the conclusion to the previous verses of the chapter, explaining the polytheists' being seduced by the embellishment of life in this world, their reliance on guardians other than God and their being tested with what they had been tested with—a covering over their eyes, heaviness in their ears, and the evil consequence that follows. It is also an introduction to the subsequent verse, *Say: I am only a mortal like you*, at the end of the chapter.

Commentary

قُلْ هَلْ نُنَبِّئُكُم بِٱلْأَخْسَرِينَ أَعْمَٰلًا ﴿١٠٣﴾

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(18:103) ***Say: Shall We inform you of the greatest losers in*** **(their)** ***deeds?***

It appears from the context that it is the polytheists who are being addressed in the second person. It is allusory. They are those meant by the description. It comes close to saying so explicitly in the verse, *These are they who disbelieve in the signs of their Lord and His meeting.* Those who deny prophethood and resurrection are polytheists.

Even though as a general rule a specifying complement is in the singular, the verbal noun applicable both to little and much, it is claimed that (the clause), *of the greatest losers in deeds* (bi-l-akhsarīn ᶜamalan), was not said in order to make known the variety of their deeds and to show that the loss is intended to apply to all of them.

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ٱلَّذِينَ ضَلَّ سَعْيُهُمْ فِى ٱلْحَيَوٰةِ ٱلدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ يَحْسَبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ يُحْسِنُونَ صُنْعًا ﴿١٠٤﴾

(18:104) (These are) ***they whose labor is lost in this world's life and they think that they are well versed in skill of the work of hands.***

This is information about the greatest losers in their deeds; in the previous verse, the polytheists were offered information about them so they could be acquainted [with their fate]. He informed the polytheists that their labor is lost in this world's life. *Ḍalāl al-saʿy* (lit. straying of labor) means loss of labor. He then follows it up with the words, *and they think that they are well versed in skill of the work of hands.* Thus they are the greatest losers.

By way of further clarification, loss and damage in ventures and labors taken on to try to earn a profit only happen when the venture or labor does not reach its target and results in a loss of capital or loss of the stake. It is what is referred to in the verse as *ḍalāl al-saʿy* (straying of the labor) as if it has lost its way, ending up the opposite of what was intended.

A person may incur a loss in his earning or labor due to lack of work experience, ignorance of the right way or coincidental factors. It is loss which it is hoped will go away because the person involved will prevent it, start work again, recover the loss, and make up for what was missed. Alternatively, he may willingly consent to profit but actually suffer detriment in the mistaken belief that he is benefitting, unable to see anything else but that. That is the worst loss, for which there is no hope of abatement.

In his life in this world, a person has no concern but to strive for his own happiness, and no worry beyond that. If he travels the road of truth and achieves his goal—true happiness—all well and good, and if he gets the way wrong without realizing his error his labor is lost but there is still hope of being saved. However, if he gets the way wrong, hits upon something other than the truth and has faith in it, whenever he is dropped a hint of truth, his soul will cast a veil over him and make the arrogance and ignorant zeal he is wrapped up in look good to him. He is then the greatest loser with regard to his deeds; his labor is most often thwarted because it is loss for the abatement of which there is no hope and no hope of its changing into happiness one day. That is what is meant by His own explanation of the greatest losers, *they whose labor is lost in this world's life and they think that they are well versed in skill of the work of their hands*.

Their thinking that their work is good in spite of the obviousness of the truth and the futility of their deeds being made clear to them is only on

account of their souls being drawn to the embellishments and vanities of the world and their immersion in desires. That stops them from inclining toward following the truth, listening to the one who invites to the truth and the one who calls to innate, instinctive belief. As He said: *And they denied them unjustly and proudly while their soul had been convinced of them . . .* (27:14), *And when it is said to him, guard against (the punishment of) God; pride carries him off to sin . . .* (2:206).

Their following their own desire and continuing to turn away from the truth out of stubbornness, pride, and immersion in their souls' desires is nothing but satisfaction on their part for the way they were and thinking that what they were doing was good.

أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُواْ بِـَٔايَٰتِ رَبِّهِمۡ وَلِقَآئِهِۦ فَحَبِطَتۡ أَعۡمَٰلُهُمۡ فَلَا نُقِيمُ لَهُمۡ يَوۡمَ ٱلۡقِيَٰمَةِ وَزۡنٗا ١٠٥

(18:104) ***These are they who disbelieve in the signs of their Lord and His meeting, so their deeds are forfeited, and therefore We will assign no weight for them on the Day of Resurrection.***

This is a second definition and explanation after the explanation of what, *the greatest losers in (their) deeds*, means. The meaning of "*signs*" as dictated by the lack of any qualification is signs on the horizons, in souls and miracles brought by prophets and messengers in support of their message. Disbelief in the signs is disbelief in prophethood. Furthermore, the Prophet himself is one of the signs. What is meant by meeting God is returning to Him, that is, the spirit's being returned to the body.

Thus the definition of, *the greatest losers in (their) deeds*, essentially refers to the fact that they deny prophethood and resurrection—this is exclusive to idolaters.

So their deeds are forfeited: The reason their deeds are forfeited is because they do not do anything for the sake of God, do not want reward and happiness in the hereafter, and the incentive to them to act is not remembrance of the Day of Reckoning. Forfeiture [of deeds] was discussed in the section on deeds in volume 2 of [the Arabic edition of] this book.

The clause, *and therefore We will assign no weight for them on the Day*

of Resurrection, follows logically from their deeds being forfeited. Weight[1] on the Day of Resurrection is through the measure of good deeds as indicated by: *And the measuring out on that day will be just; then as for him whose measure (of good deeds) is heavy, those are they who shall be successful; And as for him whose measure (of good deeds) is light, those are they who have made their souls suffer loss . . .* (7:8–9).

This is because there is no good deed—they have all been forfeited—and hence no weight.

ذَٰلِكَ جَزَآؤُهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ بِمَا كَفَرُوا۟ وَٱتَّخَذُوٓا۟ ءَايَٰتِى وَرُسُلِى هُزُوًا ﴿١٠٦﴾

(18:106) ***Thus it is that their recompense is hell, because they disbelieved and held My signs and My messengers in mockery.***

The relative sentence refers to their stated description. The relative pronoun *dhalika* (lit. meaning "that") is the predicate of an implied subject. The subject implied is *that* matter, that is, their being as We have described them. It is [meant to add] emphasis.

Their recompense is hell, is a new clause which foretells the consequence of their affair.

The sentence, *because they disbelieved and held My signs and My messengers in mockery*, means, because they disbelieved and compounded their disbelief by mocking My signs and messengers.

إِنَّ ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ وَعَمِلُوا۟ ٱلصَّٰلِحَٰتِ كَانَتْ لَهُمْ جَنَّٰتُ ٱلْفِرْدَوْسِ نُزُلًا ﴿١٠٧﴾

(18:107) ***Surely*** **(as for)** ***those who believe and do good deeds, their place of entertainment shall be the gardens of paradise*** **(firdaws),**

The word *firdaws* can be either masculine or feminine. It is said that it means garden in Greek or grape in Nabatean. The etymological origin of it is *firdasa*. It is said that it is a vine garden in Syriac or a garden in Ethiopian. It is claimed that it is Arabic and means a garden surrounded by trees in which vines are predominant.

Some exegetes understand from gardens of *firdaws*, being prepared

1 *Thiql* and *wazn* both mean weight. (Trans.)

as a place of entertainment for those who believe and do good deeds and hell's being prepared as a place of entertainment for the unbelievers that there is indescribable punishment and reward beyond heaven and hell. This theory may be supported by verses like: *So no soul knows what is hidden for them of that which will refresh the eyes . . .* (32:17) and *. . . and what they never thought of shall become plain to them from God* (39:47).

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خَٰلِدِينَ فِيهَا لَا يَبْغُونَ عَنْهَا حِوَلًا ﴿١٠٨﴾

(18:108) *Abiding therein; they shall not desire* (la yabghūna) *removal* (ḥiwalan) *from them.*

The word *baghy*, means "seeking" and *ḥiwal*, literally means "a change." The rest is clear.

Examining Narrations

Al-Durr al-manthūr says:

> "Ibn Mardawayh cites Abū Ṭufayl as saying, I heard ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib say, the libertines from Quraysh, in reply to Ibn al-Kawwā's question, Who are those referred to in (the words), *Shall We inform you of the greatest losers in (their) deeds*?"

Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī says on the authority of Imam b. Rubʿi: Ibn al-Kawwā said to the Commander of the Faithful:

> "Tell me about God's words, *Say: Shall We inform you . . . work of their hands.* He replied: 'Those are the People of the Book who disbelieved in their Lord and brought innovation into their religion. Their deeds are then forfeited. The people of the river (*nahr*)[1] are not very different from them.'"

Author's comment: It is narrated that it means the Christians.

Al-Qummī on the authority of Abū Jaʿfar and al-Ṭabrasī in *al-Iḥtijāj* on the authority of ʿAlī say that they are the People of the Book.

Al-Durr al-manthūr says on the authority of Ibn al-Mundhir and Ibn Abī Ḥātim on the authority of Abū Khumayṣa ʿAbdullāh b. Qays on the authority of ʿAlī that they are the monks who confined themselves in monasteries.

Author's comment: The oral traditions are all like demonstrations

1 This may be a reference to Imam ʿAlī's opponents at Nahrawan. (Trans.)

of the continued relevance and applicability of the Qur'an. Both verses appear in the context of words addressed to the polytheists. The third verse, *These are they who disbelieve in the signs of their Lord and His meeting,* which is the second explanation—is more applicable to idolaters than it is to anyone else as stated above. Thus what al-Qummī says about the end of the verse in his exegesis—that it was revealed about the Jews and is applicable to the Khawārij—is not correct.

Tafsīr al-burhān says on the authority of Muḥammad b. al-ᶜAbbās via his chain of narration on the authority of al-Ḥārith on the authority of ᶜAlī: "Everything has a peak and the peak of heaven is *firdaws*. It is for Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad."

Al-Durr al-manthūr says:

> al-Bukhārī, Muslim, and Ibn Abī Ḥātim cite Abū Hurayra as saying: "God's Messenger said: 'If you ask God for anything, ask Him for *firdaws* because it is in the middle of heaven and the highest part of heaven. The Merciful's (Raḥmān's) Throne is above it. The rivers of heaven gush forth from it.'"

Majmaᶜ al-bayān says:

> ᶜUbada b. al-Ṣāmit narrates on the authority of the Prophet: "Heaven is a hundred levels. The difference between every two levels is like the difference between heaven and earth. *Firdaws* is the highest of its levels. The four rivers of heaven gush forth from it. If you ask God for anything, ask Him for *firdaws*."

Author's comment: There are other oral traditions to the same effect.

Tafsīr al-Qummī says on the authority of Jaᶜfar b. Aḥmad b. ᶜUbaydallāh b. Mūsā on the authority of al-Ḥasan b. ᶜAlī b. Abī Ḥamza on the authority of his father on the authority of Abū Baṣīr on the authority of Abū ᶜAbdullāh:

> "I asked him about (the words), *Surely (as for) those who believe and do good deeds, their place of entertainment shall be the gardens of paradise* (firdaws). He replied: 'It was revealed about Abū Dharr, Salmān, Miqdād, and ᶜAmmār b. Yāsir. God assigned the gardens of *firdaws* to them as a *nuzul*, that is, a refuge and home.'"

Author's comment: It must be construed as a demonstration of continuing relevance and applicability. Alternatively, it was really revealed about the believers. The only reason the four were singled out for mention was because they were the best examples; the chapter is Meccan and Salmān became a believer in Medina. Furthermore, the chain of narration is not free of weakness.

Verse 109

Introduction

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The verse is an independent explanation of the vastness of God's words and their inexhaustibility. It would not be surprising if they were revealed on their own and not among the rest of the chapter's verses. However, if they were revealed among the rest of the verses, they are linked to everything discussed in the chapter.

That is because the beginning of the chapter points to the fact that there are divine realities. It first mentions (by way of consolation to the Prophet over his grief over people's turning their backs on remembrance) that they are all asleep to [these realities] but they will eventually awake from their slumber. The story of the Companions of the Cave is cited with regard to that. Then he[1] is reminded of matters at the end of which is the story of Moses and al-Khiḍr, because Moses witnessed him do things, the significance of which he was not aware of. Their outward appearance made him oblivious to their hidden meaning until al-Khiḍr explained it to him. At that his anxiety was calmed. It then cites the story of Dhū l-Qarnayn and the barrier which he erected by God's command against the mischief-makers, that is, Gog and Magog, who were prevented from reaching beyond the barrier and causing havoc.

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These, as the reader can see, are matters beneath which are realities and secrets and are in fact words which reveal divine purposes and explanations which inform of hidden things to which the "Wise Remembrance" [the Qur'an] calls people. The verse, though God knows best, informs of these matters, that is, God's words inform of His endless purposes. Because the verse comes after the chapter's comprehensive explanation, it is like someone who has spoken at length, saying: There is no end to this discussion. Let us content ourselves with what we have said.

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1 It is not clear if "he" here refers to the Prophet. (Ed.)

Commentary

قُل لَّوۡ كَانَ ٱلۡبَحۡرُ مِدَادٗا لِّكَلِمَٰتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ ٱلۡبَحۡرُ قَبۡلَ أَن تَنفَدَ كَلِمَٰتُ رَبِّي وَلَوۡ جِئۡنَا بِمِثۡلِهِۦ مَدَدٗا ١٠٩

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(18:109) ***Say: If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would surely run dry before the words of my Lord run dry, though We were to bring the like of that (sea) to add.***

The word *kalima* (meaning "word") can be used to refer to the plural or to the singular. Examples are: *Say: O followers of the Book! come to an equitable proposition* (kalimātin) *between us and you that we shall not serve any but God . . .* (3:64).

It is often used in the Qur'an for what God has said and ruled, for example: *. . . and the good word* (kalimatu) *of your Lord was fulfilled in the children of Israel because they bore up (sufferings) patiently* (7:137). *Thus does the word* (kalimatu) *of your Lord prove true against those who transgress that they do not believe* (10:33) *. . . and had not a word* (kalimatun) *already gone forth from your Lord, the matter would have certainly been decided between them* (10:19).

There are a great many other verses.

Everyone knows that He does not speak by opening a mouth. Rather His word means His action and the existence which He effuses, as in: *Our word for a thing when We intend it, is only that We say to it, Be, and it is* (16:40).

The only reason it is called a word is because it is a sign indicative of Him. Thus the Messiah was called a word: *. . . the Messiah, Jesus son of Maryam is only a Messenger of God and His word . . .* (4:171).

Thus, there is not a single thing (*ʿayn*) which exists which is not a word from Him on account of its being a sign indicative of Him. It is just that the Qur'anic convention is to use the term exclusively for that which is clearly indicative with no covertness, impediment or changeability about it. As He says: *. . . The truth do I speak* (38:84). *My word shall not be changed . . .* (50:29).

That is like the Messiah and instances of definitive judgment.

That is why it is clear that it is not correct to construe "words" in this

verse as the things He knows, the things He has decreed, His promises to the people deserving of reward and punishment respectively or any of the other things stated by exegetes.

The words, Say: If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, mean, if the words were inscribed and recorded in accordance with what they refer to, with that sea taken as ink, the sea would run dry before the words of my Lord run dry.

The expression, *though We were to bring the like of that (sea) to add*, means: "If We were to add another sea, that would also run dry before the words of My Lord run dry."

One exegete says:

> "*Mithlihi* means the genus of the like (that is, the likes of it) and not just like in the singular. That is because every time a like is added to the original it cannot but be used up. His '*words*', means the infinite things He knows and that which is finite cannot record that which is infinite."

Comment: What he says is true but not because of the talk of finite and infinite—even though the words are infinite—but rather because the facts referred to and the words with regard to what they refer to exceed measure. How so? If the hypothetical were realized, each atom of the sea would not be able to record its own indicativeness of His beauty and sublimity let alone if it were required to record anything else.

Repetition of the word "sea" and similarly of "my Lord" is an instance of saying in full that which can be expressed with pronouns. The reason for this is confirmation and emphasis. The same is true of using the word "Lord" specifically and annexing it to the first person singular possessive pronoun, as this shows the honor to whom it is annexed.

Examining Narrations

(1) *Tafsīr al-Qummī* says via its chain of narration back to Abū Baṣīr on the authority of Abū ʿAbdullāh about the verse [18:109]:
"It tells you that God's speech (*kalām*) has no end or limit and will never stop."

Author's comment: There is support for what was stated above in the interpretation of words (*kalimāt*) as speech (*kalām*).

Verse 110

Introduction

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The verse completes the chapter and summarizes what was intended by the explanation in the chapter. It puts together all three roots of the religion, that is, belief in one God, prophethood, and resurrection:

(1) Belief in one God is in (the statement), *that your god is one God.*
(2) Prophethood is in (the sentence), *I am only a mortal like you; it is revealed to me . . . he should do good deeds.*
(3) Resurrection is in (the clause), *therefore whoever hopes to meet his Lord . . .*

Commentary

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قُلْ إِنَّمَآ أَنَا۠ بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰٓ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَآ إِلَٰهُكُمْ إِلَٰهٌ وَٰحِدٌ ۖ فَمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا۟ لِقَآءَ رَبِّهِۦ فَلْيَعْمَلْ عَمَلًا صَٰلِحًا وَلَا يُشْرِكْ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِۦٓ أَحَدًۢا ﴿١١٠﴾

(18:110) ***Say: I am only a mortal like you; it is revealed to me that your god is one God, therefore whoever hopes to meet his Lord, he should do good deeds, and not join anyone in the service of his Lord.***

The first restriction (*I am only a mortal like you*) is with regard to his humanity, which is just like everyone else's humanity. He has nothing more than they do and does not make any claim for himself counter to the claim they made—that if he was claiming to be a Prophet, he was claiming divine essence and power pertaining to the unseen world. That is why they demanded of him what God alone knows and what God alone is capable of. However, he denied his knowing or being capable of any of that by God's command, confirming of himself only that revelation comes to him.

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The second restriction (*your god is one God*) is the god who is their God being just one God, that is, monotheism which says that everyone's god is one God.

The clause, *therefore whoever hopes to meet his Lord, he should do good deeds, and not join anyone in the service of his Lord*, contains a summary of the religious invitation, that is, to do good for the sake of God alone without any associate. It follows on logically from the hope to meet the Lord, that is, to return to Him because if there is no reckoning or requital, there would be nothing to make it necessary to adopt the religion and clothe oneself in belief. As He says: . . . *those who go astray from the path of God, they shall surely have a severe punishment because they forgot the day of reckoning* (38:26).

Doing good deeds is a consequence of not associating partners in worshiping the Lord because believing in His oneness while associating partners in one's actions are two contradictories which do not go together. Thus if God is one, then He is one in all attributes including His being an object of worship—without the worship of any other associated with it.

Adopting the religion is a consequence of hoping (although not necessarily having certain belief in) resurrection because a belief that it is possible is enough to make one wary of it. This is because of one's duty to keep possible harm away. It may be claimed that meeting means encountering esteem which is hoped for, but not something which one is certain of.

Hoping to meet God is made a logical consequence of the clause, *And your god is one God*, because the servants return to Him is part of the full sense of His divinity. He has every desirable perfection and every beautiful attribute, including doing what is right and ruling justly. They both dictate His servants' coming back to Him and His judging them. He says: *And We did not create the heaven and the earth and what is between them in vain; that is the opinion of those who disbelieve, then woe to those who disbelieve on account of the fire. Shall we treat those who believe and do good like the mischief-makers in the earth? Or shall We make those who guard (against evil) like the wicked?* (38:27–28), *And most of them do not believe in God without associating others (with Him)* (12:106).

Examining Narrations

(1) *Al-Durr al-manthūr* says Ibn Manda, Abū l-Naʿīm in *al-Ṣaḥāba* and Ibn ʿAsākir via al-Suddī al-Ṣaghīr cite on the authority of

al-Kalbī on the authority of Abū Ṣāliḥ on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbās:

"Whenever Jundub b. Zuhayr prayed, fasted or gave charity and was spoken well of he would become comfortable. He grew more and more so as people spoke and so God reproached him. The verse, *therefore whoever hopes to meet his Lord, he should do good deeds, and not join anyone in the service of his Lord*, was then revealed in relation to the matter."

Author's comment: Many other similar oral traditions which do not mention his name [Jundub] are narrated but they should be construed as the verse's being applicable to the situation. It would be surprising for the end of any chapter to be revealed for a reason all of its own.

(2) *Al-Durr al-manthūr* also says about the same verse on the authority of Abū Ḥātim on the authority of Saʿīd b. Jubayr:

"The Prophet said, Your Lord says: 'I am the best partner. I will leave all the work of anyone who associates anyone from My creation with Me in his work to (that associate) and will only accept what is for Me alone'. The Prophet then recited, *therefore whoever hopes to meet his Lord, he should do good deeds, and not join anyone in the service of his Lord.*"

(3) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* says on the authority of ʿAlī b. Sālim on the authority of Abū ʿAbdullāh:

"I am the best partner. I will not accept (the work) of anyone who associates a partner with Me in his work apart from what is for Me alone."

Al-ʿAyyāshī says in another oral tradition on his authority: God says: "I am the best partner. The work of anyone who acts for Me and another is for the one he did the work for, not Me."

(4) *Al-Durr al-manthūr* says, cited by Aḥmad and Ibn Abī l-Dunya, al-Mardawayh, and deemed to be authentic by al-Ḥākim; cited by al-Bayhaqī on the authority of Shidād b. Aws, I heard God's Messenger say:

"Whoever prays and shows off, attributes a partner. Whoever fasts and shows off, attributes a partner. Whoever gives charity and shows off, attributes a partner." He then recited, *therefore whoever hopes to meet his Lord, he should do good deeds, and not join anyone in the service of his Lord.*

(5) *Tafsīr al-ʿAyyāshī* says on the authority of Zurāra and Ḥamrān on the authority of Abū Jaʿfar and Abū ʿAbdullāh:

"If a servant does a deed seeking God's mercy and his abode in the hereafter in exchange for it but then includes some person's pleasure in it, he is one who associates partners (with God)."

Author's comment: The oral traditions under this heading via the Shīʿah and Sunnī are too numerous to mention. What is meant in them by associating partners to God (*shirk*) is latent association of partners which does not negate belief itself but rather the perfection of belief. He says: *And most of them do not believe in God without associating others (with Him)* (12:106).

Thus, the non-superficial meaning of the verse but not the context in which it was revealed applies to latent association of partners.

(6) *Al-Durr al-manthūr* says:

al-Ṭabarānī and Ibn Mardawayh cite Abū Ḥakīm as saying: "God's Messenger said, If nothing but the end of Sūrat al-Kahf had been revealed to my nation it would have been enough for them."

Author's comment: The reason for it is in the above commentary.

The end. All praise be to Almighty God.